Bret Harte

4 6

Roaring Camp Edition

THE WRITINGS OF

BRET HARTE

WITH INTRODUCTIONS, GLOSSARY, AND
INDEXES

ILLUSTRATED

VOLUME X

IT WAS COLLINSON

Stories of California and the Frontier

IN A HOLLOW OF THE HILLS

AND OTHER TALES

BY

BRET HARTE

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge

Copyright, 1894, 1895, 1896,
By BRET HARTE.
Copyright, 1896,
By HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN & CO.

All rights reserved.

CONTENTS

PAGE
IN A HOLLOW OF THE HILLS 1
THE MYSTERY OF THE HACIENDA 126
AN EPISODE OF WEST WOODLANDS 136
THE HOME-COMING OF JIM WILKES 197
A PROTÉGÉE OF JACK HAMLIN'S 210
THE REFORMATION OF JAMES REDDY 244
A CONVERT OF THE MISSION 281
CHU CHU 306
THE DEVOTION OF ENRIQUEZ 332
BULGER'S REPUTATION 363
IN THE TULES 378
BARKER'S LUCK 401
MY FIRST BOOK 427
A YELLOW DOG 436

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

PAGE

It was Collinson (see page 120) *Frontispiece.* *Orson Lowell*

Vignette on Engraved Title-page (see page 65) . . . . *Orson Lowell*

How many men have you here? . . . *Orson Lowell* . . . 68

She was like a picture . . . . . *W. L. Taylor* . . . 138

She stood watching him . . . . . *Mary Hallock Foote* . 258

You know I never meant that . . . . *J. M. Flagg* . . . 416

IN A HOLLOW OF THE HILLS AND OTHER TALES

IN A HOLLOW OF THE HILLS

CHAPTER I

It was very dark, and the wind was increasing. The last gust had been preceded by an ominous roaring down the whole mountain-side, which continued for some time after the trees in the little valley had lapsed into silence. The air was filled with a faint, cool, sodden odor, as of stirred forest depths. In those intervals of silence the darkness seemed to increase in proportion and grow almost palpable. Yet out of this sightless and soundless void now came the tinkle of a spur's rowels, the dry crackling of saddle leathers, and the muffled plunge of a hoof in the thick carpet of dust and desiccated leaves. Then a voice, which in spite of its matter-of-fact reality the obscurity lent a certain mystery to, said: —

"I can't make out anything! Where the devil have we got to, anyway? It's as black as Tophet here ahead!"

"Strike a light and make a flare with something," returned a second voice. "Look where you're shoving to — now — keep your horse off, will ye?"

There was more muffled plunging, a silence, the rustle of paper, the quick spurt of a match, and then the uplifting of a flickering flame. But it revealed only the heads and shoulders of three horsemen, framed within a nebulous ring of light, that still left their horses and even their lower figures in impenetrable shadow. Then the flame leaped up and died out with a few zigzagging sparks that were falling to the ground, when a third voice, that was low but somewhat pleasant in its cadence, said: —

"Be careful where you throw that. You were careless last time. With this wind and the leaves like tinder, you might send a furnace blast through the woods."

"Then at least we'd see where we are."

Nevertheless, he moved his horse, whose trampling hoofs beat out the last fallen spark. Complete darkness and silence again followed. Presently the first speaker continued: —

"I reckon we'll have to wait here till the next squall clears away the scud from the sky. Hello! What's that?"

Out of the obscurity before them appeared a faint light, — a dim but perfectly defined square of radiance, — which, however, did not appear to illuminate anything around it. Suddenly it disappeared.

"That's a house — it's a light in a window," said the second voice.

"House be d—d!" retorted the first speaker. "A house with a window on Galloper's Ridge, fifteen miles from anywhere? You're crazy!"

Nevertheless, from the muffled plunging and tinkling that followed, they seemed to be moving in the direction where the light had appeared. Then there was a pause.

"There's nothing but a rocky outcrop here, where a house could n't stand, and we're off the trail again," said the first speaker impatiently.

"Stop! — there it is again!"

The same square of light appeared once more, but the horsemen had evidently diverged in the darkness, for it seemed to be in a different direction. But it was more distinct, and as they gazed a shadow appeared upon its radiant surface — the profile of a human face. Then the light suddenly went out, and the face vanished with it.

"It *is* a window, and there was some one behind it," said the second speaker emphatically.

"It was a woman's face," said the pleasant voice.

"Whoever it is, just hail them, so that we can get our bearings. Sing out! All together!"

The three voices rose in a prolonged shout, in which, however, the distinguishing quality of the pleasant voice was sustained. But there was no response from the darkness beyond. The shouting was repeated after an interval with the same result: the silence and obscurity remained unchanged.

"Let 's get out of this!" said the first speaker angrily. "House or no house, man or woman, we 're not wanted, and we 'll make nothing waltzing round here."

"Hush!" said the second voice. "Sh-h! Listen."

The leaves of the nearest trees were trilling audibly. Then came a sudden gust that swept the fronds of the taller ferns into their faces, and laid the thin, lithe whips of alder over their horses' flanks sharply. It was followed by the distant sea-like roaring of the mountain-side.

"That 's a little more like it!" said the first speaker joyfully. "Another blow like that and we 're all right. And look! there 's a lightenin' up over the trail we came by."

There was indeed a faint glow in that direction, like the first suffusion of dawn, permitting the huge shoulder of the mountain along whose flanks they had been journeying to be distinctly seen. The sodden breath of the stirred forest depths was slightly tainted with an acrid fume.

"That 's the match you threw away two hours ago," said the pleasant voice deliberately. "It 's caught the dry brush in the trail round the bend."

"Anyhow, it 's given us our bearings, boys," said the first speaker, with satisfied accents. "We 're all right now; and the wind 's lifting the sky ahead there. Forward now, all together, and let 's get out of this hell-hole while we can!"

It was so much lighter that the bulk of each horseman could be seen as they moved forward together. But there was no thinning of the obscurity on either side of them. Nevertheless the profile of the horseman with the pleasant voice seemed to be occasionally turned backward, and he suddenly checked his horse.

"There 's the window again!" he said. "Look! There — it 's gone again."

"Let it go and be d—d!" returned the leader. "Come on."

They spurred forward in silence. It was not long before the wayside trees began to dimly show spaces between them, and the ferns to give way to lower, thick-set shrubs, which in turn yielded to a velvety moss, with long quiet intervals of netted and tangled grasses. The regular fall of the horses' feet became a mere rhythmic throbbing. Then suddenly a single hoof rang out sharply on stone, and the first speaker reined in slightly.

"Thank the Lord we 're on the ridge now! and the rest is easy. Tell you what, though, boys, now we 're all right, I don't mind saying that I did n't take no stock in that blamed corpse light down there. If there ever was a will-o'-the-wisp on a square up mountain, that was one. It was n't no window! Some of ye thought ye saw a face too — eh?"

"Yes, and a rather pretty one," said the pleasant voice meditatively.

"That 's the way they 'd build that sort of thing, of course. It's lucky ye had to satisfy yourself with looking. Gosh! I feel creepy yet, thinking of it! What are ye looking back for now, like Lot's wife? Blamed if I don't think that face bewitched ye."

"I was only thinking about that fire you started," returned the other quietly. "I don't see it now."

"Well — if you did?"

"I was wondering whether it could reach that hollow."

"I reckon that hollow could take care of any casual nat'rel fire that came boomin' along, and go two better every time! Why, I don't believe there was any fire; it was all a piece of that infernal ignis fatuus phantasmagoriana that was played upon us down there!"

With the laugh that followed they started forward again, relapsing into the silence of tired men at the end of a long journey. Even their few remarks were interjectional, or reminiscent of topics whose freshness had been exhausted with the day. The gaining light, which seemed to come from the ground about them rather than from the still overcast sky above, defined their individuality more distinctly. The man who had first spoken, and who seemed to be their leader, wore the virgin unshaven beard, mustache, and flowing hair of the Californian pioneer, and might have been the eldest; the second speaker was close-shaven, thin, and energetic; the third, with the pleasant voice, in height, litheness, and suppleness of figure appeared to be the youngest of the party. The trail had now become a grayish streak along the level tableland they were following, which also had the singular effect of appearing lighter than the surrounding landscape, yet of plunging into utter darkness on either side of its precipitous walls. Nevertheless, at the end of an hour the leader rose in his stirrups with a sigh of satisfaction.

"There's the light in Collinson's mill! There's nothing gaudy and spectacular about that, boys, eh? No, sir! it's a square, honest beacon that a man can steer by. We 'll be there in twenty minutes." He was pointing into the darkness below the already descending trail. Only a pioneer's eye could have detected the few pin-pricks of light in the impenetrable distance, and it was a signal proof of his leadership that the others accepted it without seeing it. "It 's just ten o'clock," he continued, holding a huge silver watch to his eye; "we 've wasted an hour on those blamed spooks yonder."

"We were n't off the trail more than ten minutes, Uncle Dick," protested the pleasant voice.

"All right, my son; go down there if you like and fetch out your Witch of Endor, but as for me, I 'm going to throw myself the other side of Collinson's lights. They 're good enough for me, and a blamed sight more stationary."

The grade was very steep, but they took it, California fashion, at a gallop, being genuinely good riders, and using their brains as well as their spurs in the understanding of their horses, and of certain natural laws which the more artificial riders of civilization are apt to overlook. Hence there was no hesitation or indecision communicated to the nervous creatures they bestrode, who swept over crumbling stones and slippery ledges with a momentum that took away half their weight, and made a stumble or false step, or indeed anything but an actual collision, almost impossible. Closing together they avoided the latter, and, holding each other well up, became one irresistible wedge-shaped mass. At times they yelled, not from consciousness nor bravado, but from the purely animal instinct of warning and to combat the breathlessness of their descent, until, reaching the level, they charged across the gravelly bed of a vanished river, and pulled up at Collinson's mill. The mill itself had long since vanished with the river, but the building that had once stood for it was used as a rude hostelry for travelers, which, however, bore no legend or invitatory sign. Those who wanted it, knew it; those who passed it by, gave it no offense.

Collinson himself stood by the door, smoking a contemplative pipe. As they rode up, he disengaged himself from the doorpost listlessly, walked slowly toward them, said reflectively to the leader, "I've been thinking with you that a vote for Thompson is a vote thrown away," and prepared to lead the horses toward the water tank. He had parted with them over twelve hours before, but his air of simply renewing a recently interrupted conversation was too common a circumstance to attract their notice. They knew, and he knew, that no one else had passed that way since he had last spoken; that the same sun had swung silently above him and the unchanged landscape, and there had been no interruption nor diversion to his monotonous thought. The wilderness annihilates time and space with the grim pathos of patience.

Nevertheless he smiled. "Ye don't seem to have got through coming down yet," he continued, as a few small boulders, loosened in their rapid descent, came more deliberately rolling and plunging after the travelers along the gravelly bottom. Then he turned away with the horses, and, after they were watered, he reëntered the house. His guests had evidently not waited for his ministration. They had already taken one or two bottles from the shelves behind a wide bar and helped themselves, and, glasses in hand, were now satisfying the more imminent cravings of hunger with biscuits from a barrel and slices of smoked herring from a box. Their equally singular host, accepting their conduct as not unusual, joined the circle they had comfortably drawn round the fireplace, and meditatively kicking a brand back at the fire, said, without looking at them: —

"Well?"

"Well!" returned the leader, leaning back in his chair after carefully unloosing the buckle of his belt, but with his eyes also on the fire, — "well! we 've prospected every yard of outcrop along the Divide, and there ain't the ghost of a silver indication anywhere."

"Not a smell," added the close-shaven guest, without raising his eyes.

They all remained silent, looking at the fire, as if it were the one thing they had taken into their confidence. Collinson also addressed himself to the blaze as he said presently:

"It allus seemed to me that thar was something shiny about that ledge just round the shoulder of the spur, over the long cañon."

The leader ejaculated a short laugh. "Shiny, eh? shiny! Ye think *that* a sign? Why, you might as well reckon that because Key's head, over thar, is gray and silvery that he 's got sabe and experience." As he spoke he looked toward the man with a pleasant voice. The fire shining full upon him revealed the singular fact that while his face was still young and his mustache quite dark, his hair was perfectly gray. The object of this attention, far from being disconcerted by the comparison, added with a smile: —

"Or that he had any silver in his pocket."

Another lapse of silence followed. The wind tore round the house and rumbled in the short adobe chimney.

"No, gentlemen," said the leader reflectively, "this sort o' thing is played out. I don't take no more stock in that cock-and-bull story about the lost Mexican mine. I don't catch on to that Sunday-school yarn about the pious, scientific sharp who collected leaves and vegetables all over the Divide. all the while he scientifically knew that the range was solid silver, only he would n't soil his fingers with God-forsaken lucre. I ain't saying anything agin that fine-spun theory that Key believes in about volcanic upheavals that set up on end argentiferous rock, but I simply say that *I* don't see it — with the naked eye. And I reckon it 's about time, boys, as the game's up, that we handed in our checks, and left the board."

There was another silence around the fire, another whirl and turmoil without. There was no attempt to combat the opinions of their leader; possibly the same sense of disappointed hopes was felt by all, only they preferred to let the man of greater experience voice it. He went on: —

"We've had our little game, boys, ever since we left Rawlin's a week ago; we've had our ups and downs; we've been starved and parched, snowed up and half drowned, shot at by road-agents and horse-thieves, kicked by mules and played with by grizzlies. We've had a heap o' fun, boys, for our money, but I reckon the picnic is about over. So we'll shake hands to-morrow all round and call it square, and go on our ways separately."

"And what do you think you'll do, Uncle Dick?" said his close-shaven companion listlessly.

"I'll make tracks for a square meal, a bed that a man can comfortably take off his boots and die in, and some violet-scented soap. Civilization's good enough for me! I even reckon I wouldn't mind 'the sound of the church-going bell' ef there was a theatre handy, as there likely would be. But the wilderness is played out."

"You'll be back to it again in six months, Uncle Dick," retorted the other quickly.

Uncle Dick did not reply. It was a peculiarity of the party that in their isolated companionship they had already exhausted discussion and argument. A silence followed, in which they all looked at the fire as if it was its turn to make a suggestion.

"Collinson," said the pleasant voice abruptly, "who lives in the hollow this side of the Divide, about two miles from the first spur above the big cañon?"

"Nary soul!"

"Are you sure?"

"Sartin! Thar ain't no one but me betwixt Bald Top and Skinner's — twenty-five miles."

"Of course, *you* 'd know if any one had come there lately?" persisted the pleasant voice.

"I reckon. It ain't a week ago that I tramped the whole distance that you fellers just rode over."

"There ain't," said the leader deliberately, "any enchanted castle or cabin that goes waltzing round the road with revolving windows and fairy princesses looking out of 'em?"

But Collinson, recognizing this as purely irrelevant humor, with possibly a trap or pitfall in it, moved away from the fireplace without a word, and retired to the adjoining kitchen to prepare supper. Presently he reappeared.

"The pork bar'l 's empty, boys, so I 'll hev to fix ye up with jerked beef, potatoes, and flapjacks. Ye see, thar ain't anybody ben over from Skinner's store for a week."

"All right; only hurry up!" said Uncle Dick cheerfully, settling himself back in his chair. "I reckon to turn in as soon as I 've rastled with your hash, for I 've got to turn out agin and be off at sun-up."

They were all very quiet again, — so quiet that they could not help noticing that the sound of Collinson's preparations for their supper had ceased too. Uncle Dick arose softly and walked to the kitchen door. Collinson was sitting before a small kitchen stove, with a fork in his hand, gazing abstractedly before him. At the sound of his guest's footsteps he started, and the noise of preparation recommenced. Uncle Dick returned to his chair by the fire. Leaning towards the chair of the close-shaven man, he said in a lower voice: —

"He was off agin!"

"What?"

"Thinkin' of that wife of his."

"What about his wife?" asked Key, lowering his voice also.

The three men's heads were close together.

"When Collinson fixed up this mill he sent for his wife in the States," said Uncle Dick, in a half whisper, "waited a year for her, hanging round and boarding every emigrant wagon that came through the Pass. She did n't come, — only the news that she was dead." He paused and nudged his chair still closer — the heads were almost touching. "They say, over in the Bar," — his voice had sunk to a complete whisper, — "that it was a lie! That she ran away with the man that was fetchin' her out. Three thousand miles and three weeks with another man upsets some women. But *he* knows nothing about it, only he sometimes kinder goes off loony-like, thinking of her." He stopped, the heads separated; Collinson had appeared at the doorway, his melancholy patience apparently unchanged.

"Grub 's on, gentlemen; sit by and eat."

The humble meal was dispatched with zest and silence. A few interjectional remarks about the uncertainties of prospecting only accented the other pauses. In ten minutes they were out again by the fireplace with their lit pipes. As there were only three chairs, Collinson stood beside the chimney.

"Collinson," said Uncle Dick, after the usual pause, taking his pipe from his lips, "as we 've got to get up and get at sun-up, we might as well tell you now that we 're dead broke. We 've been living for the last few weeks on Preble Key's loose change — and that 's gone. You 'll have to let this little account and damage stand over."

Collinson's brow slightly contracted, without, however, altering his general expression of resigned patience.

"I 'm sorry for you, boys," he said slowly, "and" (diffidently) "kinder sorry for myself, too. You see, I reckoned on goin' over to Skinner's to-morrow, to fill up the pork bar'l and vote for Mesick and the wagon-road. But Skinner can't let me have anything more until I 've paid suthin' on account, as he calls it."

"D' ye mean to say thar 's any mountain man as low flung and mean as that ?" said Uncle Dick indignantly.

"But it is n't *his* fault," said Collinson gently; "you see, they won't send him goods from Sacramento if he don't pay up, and he *can't* if I *don't*. Sabe ?"

"Ah ! that 's another thing. They *are* mean — in Sacramento," said Uncle Dick, somewhat mollified.

The other guests murmured an assent to this general proposition. Suddenly Uncle Dick's face brightened.

"Look here ! I know Skinner, and I 'll stop there — No, blank it all ! I can't, for it 's off my route ! Well, then, we 'll fix it this way: Key will go there and tell Skinner that *I* say that *I* 'll send the money to that Sacramento hound. That 'll fix it."

Collinson's brow cleared; the solution of the difficulty seemed to satisfy everybody, and the close-shaven man smiled.

"And I 'll secure it," he said, "and give Collinson a sight draft on myself at San Francisco."

"What 's that for ?" said Collinson, with a sudden suffusion on each cheek.

"In case of accident."

"Wot accident ?" persisted Collinson, with a dark look of suspicion on his usually placid face.

"In case we should forget it," said the close-shaven man, with a laugh.

"And do you suppose that if you boys went and forgot it that I 'd have anything to do with your d—d paper ?" said Collinson, a murky cloud coming into his eyes.

"Why, that 's only business, Colly," interposed Uncle Dick quickly; "that 's all Jim Parker means; he 's a business man, don't you see. Suppose we got killed ! You 've that draft to show."

"Show who?" growled Collinson.

"Why, — hang it! — our friends, our heirs, our relations — to get your money," hesitated Uncle Dick.

"And do you kalkilate," said Collinson, with deeply laboring breath, "that if you got killed, that I'd be coming on your folks for the worth of the d—d truck I giv ye? Go 'way! Lemme git out o' this. You're makin' me tired."

He stalked to the door, lit his pipe, and began to walk up and down the gravelly river-bed. Uncle Dick followed him. From time to time the two other guests heard the sounds of alternate protest and explanation as they passed and repassed the windows. Preble Key smiled, Parker shrugged his shoulders.

"He'll be thinkin' you've begrudged him your grub if you don't — that's the way with these business men," said Uncle Dick's voice in one of these intervals. Presently they reëntered the house, Uncle Dick saying casually to Parker, "You can leave that draft on the bar when you're ready to go to-morrow;" and the incident was presumed to have ended. But Collinson did not glance in the direction of Parker for the rest of the evening; and, indeed, standing with his back to the chimney, more than once fell into that stolid abstraction which was supposed to be the contemplation of his absent wife.

From this silence, which became infectious, the three guests were suddenly aroused by a furious clattering down the steep descent of the mountain, along the trail they had just ridden! It came near, increasing in sound, until it even seemed to scatter the fine gravel of the river-bed against the sides of the house, and then passed in a gust of wind that shook the roof and roared in the chimney. With one common impulse the three travelers rose and went to the door. They opened it to a blackness that seemed to stand as another and an iron door before them, but to nothing else.

"Somebody went by then," said Uncle Dick, turning to Collinson. "Did n't you hear it?"

"Nary," said Collinson patiently, without moving from the chimney.

"What in God's name was it then?"

"Only some of them boulders you loosed coming down. It's touch and go with them for days after. When I first came here I used to start up and rush out into the road — like as you would — yellin' and screechin' after folks that never was there and never went by. Then it got kinder monotonous, and I'd lie still and let 'em slide. Why, one night I'd 'a' sworn that some one pulled up with a yell and shook the door. But I sort of allowed to myself that whatever it was, it was n't wantin' to eat, drink, sleep, or it would come in, and I had n't any call to interfere. And in the mornin' I found a rock as big as that box, lying chock-a-block agin the door. Then I knowed I was right."

Preble Key remained looking from the door.

"There's a glow in the sky over Big Cañon," he said, with a meaning glance at Uncle Dick.

"Saw it an hour ago," said Collinson. "It must be the woods afire just round the bend above the cañon. Whoever goes to Skinner's had better give it a wide berth."

Key turned towards Collinson as if to speak, but apparently changed his mind, and presently joined his companions, who were already rolling themselves in their blankets, in a series of wooden bunks or berths, ranged as in a ship's cabin, around the walls of a resinous, sawdusty apartment that had been the measuring room of the mill. Collinson disappeared, — no one knew or seemed to care where, — and in less than ten minutes from the time that they had returned from the door the hush of sleep and rest seemed to possess the whole house. There was no light but that of the fire in the front room, which threw flickering and gigantic shadows on the walls of the three empty chairs before it. An hour later it seemed as if one of the chairs were occupied, and a grotesque profile of Collinson's slumbering — or meditating — face and figure was projected grimly on the rafters as though it were the hovering guardian spirit of the house. But even that passed presently and faded out, and the beleaguering darkness that had encompassed the house all the evening began to slowly creep in through every chink and cranny of the rambling, ill-jointed structure, until it at last obliterated even the faint embers on the hearth. The cool fragrance of the woodland depths crept in with it until the steep of human warmth, the reek of human clothing, and the lingering odors of stale human victual were swept away in that incorruptible and omnipotent breath. An hour later — and the wilderness had repossessed itself of all.

Key, the lightest sleeper, awoke early, — so early that the dawn announced itself only in two dim squares of light that seemed to grow out of the darkness at the end of the room where the windows looked out upon the valley. This reminded him of his woodland vision of the night before, and he lay and watched them until they brightened and began to outline the figures of his still sleeping companions. But there were faint stirrings elsewhere, — the soft brushing of a squirrel across the shingled roof, the tiny flutter of invisible wings in the rafters, the "peep" and "squeak" of baby life below the floor. And then he fell into a deeper sleep, and awoke only when it was broad day.

The sun was shining upon the empty bunks; his companions were already up and gone. They had separated as they had come together, — with the light-hearted irresponsibility of animals, — without regret, and scarcely reminiscence; bearing, with cheerful philosophy and the hopefulness of a future unfettered by their past, the final disappointment of their quest. If they ever met again, they would laugh and remember; if they did not, they would forget without a sigh. He hurriedly dressed himself, and went outside to dip his face and hands in the bucket that stood beside the door; but the clear air, the dazzling sunshine, and the unexpected prospect half intoxicated him.

The abandoned mill stretched beside him in all the pathos of its premature decay. The ribs of the water-wheel appeared amid a tangle of shrubs and driftwood, and were twined with long grasses and straggling vines; mounds of sawdust and heaps of "brush" had taken upon themselves a velvety moss where the trickling slime of the vanished river lost itself in sluggish pools, discolored with the dyes of redwood. But on the other side of the rocky ledge dropped the whole length of the valley, alternately bathed in sunshine or hidden in drifts of white and clinging smoke. The upper end of the long cañon, and the crests of the ridge above him, were lost in this fleecy cloud, which at times seemed to overflow the summits and fall in slow leaps like lazy cataracts down the mountain-side. Only the range before the ledge was clear; there the green pines seemed to swell onward and upward in long mounting billows, until at last they broke against the sky.

In the keen stimulus of the hour and the air Key felt the mountaineer's longing for action, and scarcely noticed that Collinson had pathetically brought out his pork barrel to scrape together a few remnants for his last meal. It was not until he had finished his coffee, and Collinson had brought up his horse, that a slight sense of shame at his own and his comrades' selfishness embarrassed his parting with his patient host. He himself was going to Skinner's to plead for him; he knew that Parker had left the draft, — he had seen it lying on the bar, — but a new sense of delicacy kept him from alluding to it now. It was better to leave Collinson with his own peculiar ideas of the responsibilities of hospitality unchanged. Key shook his hand warmly, and galloped up the rocky slope. But when he had finally reached the higher level, and fancied he could even now see the dust raised by his departing comrades on their two diverging paths, although he knew that they had already gone their different ways, — perhaps never to meet again, — his thoughts and his eyes reverted only to the ruined mill below him and its lonely occupant.

He could see him quite distinctly in that clear air, still standing before his door. And then he appeared to make a parting gesture with his hand, and something like snow fluttered in the air above his head. It was only the torn fragments of Parker's draft, which this homely gentleman of the Sierras, standing beside his empty pork barrel, had scattered to the four winds.

CHAPTER II

KEY'S attention was presently directed to something more important to his present purpose. The keen wind which he had faced in mounting the grade had changed, and was now blowing at his back. His experience of forest fires had already taught him that this was too often only the cold air rushing in to fill the vacuum made by the conflagration, and it needed not his sensation of an acrid smarting in his eyes, and an unaccountable dryness in the air which he was now facing, to convince him that the fire was approaching him. It had evidently traveled faster than he had expected, or had diverged from its course. He was disappointed, not because it would oblige him to take another route to Skinner's, as Collinson had suggested, but for a very different reason. Ever since his vision of the preceding night, he had resolved to revisit the hollow and discover the mystery. He had kept his purpose a secret, — partly because he wished to avoid the jesting remarks of his companions, but particularly because he wished to go alone, from a very singular impression that although they had witnessed the incident he had really seen more than they did. To this was also added the haunting fear he had felt during the night that this mysterious habitation and its occupants were in the track of the conflagration. He had not dared to dwell upon it openly on account of Uncle Dick's evident responsibility for the origin of the fire; he appeased his conscience with the reflection that the inmates of the dwelling no doubt had ample warning in time to escape. But still, he and his companions ought to have stopped to help them, and then — But here he paused, conscious of another reason he could scarcely voice then, or even now. Preble Key had not passed the age of romance, but like other romancists he thought he had evaded it by treating it practically.

Meantime he had reached the fork where the trail diverged to the right, and he must take that direction if he wished to make a détour of the burning woods to reach Skinner's. His momentary indecision communicated itself to his horse, who halted. Recalled to himself, he looked down mechanically, when his attention was attracted by an unfamiliar object lying in the dust of the trail. It was a small slipper — so small that at first he thought it must have belonged to some child. He dismounted and picked it up. It was worn and shaped to the foot. It could not have lain there long, for it was not filled nor discolored by the wind-blown dust of the trail, as all other adjacent objects were. If it had been dropped by a passing traveler, that traveler must have passed Collinson's going or coming, within the last twelve hours. It was scarcely possible that the shoe could have dropped from the foot without the wearer's knowing it, and it must have been dropped in an urgent flight, or it would have been recovered. Thus practically Key treated his romance. And having done so, he instantly wheeled his horse and plunged into the road in the direction of the fire.

But he was surprised after twenty minutes' riding to find that the course of the fire had evidently changed. It was growing clearer before him; the dry heat seemed to come more from the right, in the direction of the détour he should have taken to Skinner's. This seemed almost providential, and in keeping with his practical treatment of his romance, as was also the fact that in all probability the fire had not yet visited the little hollow which he intended to explore. He knew he was nearing it now;

the locality had been strongly impressed upon him even in the darkness of the previous evening. He had passed the rocky ledge; his horse's hoofs no longer rang out clearly; slowly and perceptibly they grew deadened in the springy mosses, and were finally lost in the netted grasses and tangled vines that indicated the vicinity of the densely wooded hollow. Here were already some of the wider-spaced vanguards of that wood; but here, too, a peculiar circumstance struck him. He was already descending the slight declivity; but the distance, instead of deepening in leafy shadow, was actually growing lighter. Here were the outskirting sentinels of the wood — but the wood itself was gone! He spurred his horse through the tall arch between the opened columns, and pulled up in amazement.

The wood, indeed, was gone, and the whole hollow filled with the already black and dead stumps of the utterly consumed forest! More than that, from the indications before him, the catastrophe must have almost immediately followed his retreat from the hollow on the preceding night. It was evident that the fire had leaped the intervening shoulder of the spur in one of the unaccountable, but by no means rare, phenomena of this kind of disaster. The circling heights around were yet untouched; only the hollow, and the ledge of rock against which they had blundered with their horses when they were seeking the mysterious window in last evening's darkness, were calcined and destroyed. He dismounted and climbed the ledge, still warm from the spent fire. A large mass of grayish outcrop had evidently been the focus of the furnace blast of heat which must have raged for hours in this spot. He was skirting its crumbling débris when he started suddenly at a discovery which made everything else fade into utter insignificance. Before him, in a slight depression formed by a fault or lapse in the upheaved strata, lay the charred and incinerated remains of a dwelling-house leveled to the earth! Originally half hidden by a natural abatis of growing myrtle and ceanothus which covered this counterscarp of rock towards the trail, it must have stood within a hundred feet of them during their halt!

Even in its utter and complete obliteration by the furious furnace blast that had swept across it, there was still to be seen an unmistakable ground-plan and outline of a four-roomed house. While everything that was combustible had succumbed to that intense heat, there was still enough half-fused and warped metal, fractured iron plate, and twisted and broken bars to indicate the kitchen and tool shed. Very little had, evidently, been taken away; the house and its contents were consumed where they stood. With a feeling of horror and desperation Key at last ventured to disturb two or three of the blackened heaps that lay before him. But they were only vestiges of clothing, bedding, and crockery — there was no human trace that he could detect. Nor was there any suggestion of the original condition and quality of the house, except its size: whether the ordinary unsightly cabin of frontier "partners," or some sylvan cottage — there was nothing left but the usual ignoble and unsavory ruins of burnt-out human habitation.

And yet its very existence was a mystery. It had been unknown at Collinson's, its nearest neighbor, and it was presumable that it was equally unknown at Skinner's. Neither he nor his companions had detected it in their first journey by day through the hollow, and only the telltale window at night had been a hint of what was even then so successfully concealed that they could not discover it when they had blundered against its rock foundation. For concealed it certainly was, and intentionally so. But for what purpose?

He gave his romance full play for a few minutes with this question. Some recluse, preferring the absolute simplicity of nature, or perhaps wearied with the artificialities of society, had secluded himself here with the company of his only daughter. Proficient as a pathfinder, he had easily discovered some other way of provisioning his house from the settlements than by the ordinary trails past Collinson's or Skinner's, which would have betrayed his vicinity. But recluses are not usually accompanied by young daughters, whose relations with the world, not being as antagonistic, would make them uncertain companions. Why not a wife? His presumption of the extreme youth of the face he had seen at the window was after all only based upon the slipper he had found. And if a wife, whose absolute acceptance of such confined seclusion might be equally uncertain, why not somebody else's wife? Here was a reason for concealment, and the end of an episode, not unknown even in the wilderness. And here was the work of the Nemesis who had overtaken them in their guilty contentment! The story, even to its moral, was complete. And yet it did not entirely satisfy him, so superior is the absolutely unknown to the most elaborate theory.

His attention had been once or twice drawn towards the crumbling wall of outcrop, which during the conflagration must have felt the full force of the fiery blast that had swept through the hollow and spent its fury upon it. It bore evidence of the intense heat in cracked fissures and the crumbling débris that lay at its feet. Key picked up some of the still warm fragments, and was not surprised that they easily broke in a gritty, grayish powder in his hands. In spite of his preoccupation with the human interest, the instinct of the prospector was still strong upon him, and he almost mechanically put some of the pieces in his pockets. Then after another careful survey of the locality for any further record of its vanished tenants, he returned to his horse. Here he took from his saddle-bags, half listlessly, a precious phial encased in wood, and, opening it, poured into another thick glass vessel part of a smoking fluid; he then crumbled some of the calcined fragments into the glass, and watched the ebullition that followed with mechanical gravity. When it had almost ceased he drained off the contents into another glass, which he set down, and then proceeded to pour some water from his drinking-flask into the ordinary tin cup which formed part of his culinary traveling-kit. Into this he put three or four pinches of salt from his provision store. Then dipping his fingers into the salt and water, he allowed a drop to fall into the glass. A white cloud instantly gathered in the colorless fluid, and then fell in a fine film to the bottom of the glass. Key's eyes concentrated suddenly, the listless look left his face. His fingers trembled lightly as he again let the salt water fall into the solution, with exactly the same result! Again and again he repeated it, until the bottom of the glass was quite gray with the fallen precipitate. And his own face grew as gray.

His hand trembled no longer as he carefully poured off the solution so as not to disturb the precipitate at the bottom. Then he drew out his knife, scooped a little of the gray sediment upon its point, and emptying his tin cup, turned it upside down upon his knee, placed the sediment upon it, and began to spread it over the dull surface of its bottom with his knife. He had intended to rub it briskly with his knife-blade. But in the very action of spreading it, the first stroke of his knife left upon the sediment and the cup the luminous streak of burnished silver!

He stood up and drew a long breath to still the beatings of his heart. Then he rapidly re-climbed the rock, and passed over the ruins again, this time plunging hurriedly through, and kicking aside the charred heaps without a thought of what they had contained. Key was not an unfeeling man, he was not an unrefined one: he was a gentleman by instinct, and had an intuitive sympathy for others; but in that instant his whole mind was concentrated upon the calcined outcrop! And his first impulse was to see if it bore any evidence of previous examination, prospecting, or working by its suddenly evicted neighbors and owners. There was none: they had evidently not known it. Nor was there any reason to suppose that they would ever return to their hidden home, now devastated and laid bare to the open sunlight and open trail. They were already far away; their guilty personal secret would keep them from revisiting it. An immense feeling of relief came over the soul of this moral romancer; a momentary recognition of the Most High in this perfect poetical retribution. He ran back quickly to his saddle-bags, drew out one or two carefully written, formal notices of preëmption and claim, which he and his former companions had carried in their brief partnership, erased their signatures and left only his own name, with another grateful sense of Divine interference, as he thought of them speeding far away in the distance, and returned to the ruins. With unconscious irony, he selected a charred post from the embers, stuck it in the ground a few feet from the débris of outcrop, and finally affixed his "Notice." Then, with a conscientiousness born possibly of his new religious convictions, he dislodged with his pickaxe enough of the brittle outcrop to constitute that presumption of "actual work" upon the claim which was legally required for its maintenance, and returned to his horse. In replacing his things in his saddle-bags he came upon the slipper, and for an instant so complete was his preoccupation in his later discovery, that he was about to throw it away as useless impedimenta, until it occurred to him, albeit vaguely, that it might be of service to him in its connection with that discovery, in the way of refuting possible false claimants. He was not aware of any faithlessness to his momentary romance, any more than he was conscious of any disloyalty to his old companions, in his gratification that his good fortune had come to him alone. This singular selection was a common experience of prospecting. And there was something about the magnitude of his discovery that seemed to point to an individual achievement. He had made a rough calculation of the richness of the lode from the quantity of precipitate in his rude experiment; he had estimated its length, breadth, and thickness from his slight knowledge of geology and the theories then ripe; and the yield would be colossal! Of course, he would require capital to work it, he would have to "let in" others to his scheme and his prosperity; but the control of it would always be *his own.*

Then he suddenly started as he had never in his life before started at the foot of man! For there was a footfall in the charred brush; and not twenty yards from him stood Collinson, who had just dismounted from a mule. The blood rushed to Key's pale face.

"Prospectin' agin?" said the proprietor of the mill, with his weary smile.

"No," said Key quickly, "only straightening my pack." The blood deepened in his cheek at his instinctive lie. Had he carefully thought it out before, he would have welcomed Collinson, and told him all. But now a quick, uneasy suspicion flashed upon him. Perhaps his late host had lied, and knew of the existence of the hidden house. Perhaps — he had spoken of some "silvery rock" the night before — he knew something of the lode itself. He turned upon him an aggressive face. But Collinson's next words dissipated the thought.

"I'm glad I found ye, anyhow," he said. "Ye see, arter you left, I saw ye turn off the trail and make for the burning woods instead o' goin' round. I sez to myself, 'That fellow is making straight for Skinner's. He's sorter worried about me and that empty pork bar'l,' — I had n't oughter spoke that away afore you boys, anyhow, — 'and he 's takin' risks to help me.' So I reckoned I 'd throw my leg over Jenny here, and look arter ye — and go over to Skinner's myself — and vote."

"Certainly," said Key with cheerful alacrity, and the one thought of getting Collinson away; "we 'll go together, and we 'll see that that pork barrel is filled!" He glowed quite honestly with this sudden idea of remembering Collinson through his good fortune. "Let 's get on quickly, for we may find the fire between us on the outer trail." He hastily mounted his horse.

"Then you did n't take this as a short cut," said Collinson, with dull perseverance in his idea. "Why not? It looks all clear ahead."

"Yes," said Key hurriedly, "but it 's been only a leap of the fire, it 's still raging round the bend. We must go back to the cross-trail." His face was still flushing with his very equivocating, and his anxiety to get his companion away. Only a few steps further might bring Collinson before the ruins and the "Notice," and that discovery must not be made by him until Key's plans were perfected. A sudden aversion to the man he had a moment before wished to reward began to take possession of him. "Come on," he added almost roughly.

But to his surprise, Collinson yielded with his usual grim patience, and even a slight look of sympathy with his friend's annoyance. "I reckon you 're right, and mebbee you 're in a hurry to get to Skinner's all along o' *my* business. I ought n't hev told you boys what I did." As they rode rapidly away he took occasion to add, when Key had reined in slightly, with a feeling of relief at being out of the hollow, "I was thinkin', too, of what you 'd asked about any one livin' here unbeknownst to me."

"Well," said Key, with a new nervousness.

"Well; I only had an idea o' proposin' that you and me just took a look around that holler whar you thought you saw suthin'!" said Collinson tentatively.

"Nonsense," said Key hurriedly. "We really saw nothing — it was all a fancy; and Uncle Dick was joking me because I said I thought I saw a woman's face," he added with a forced laugh.

Collinson glanced at him, half sadly. "Oh! You were only funnin', then. I oughter guessed that. I oughter have knowed it from Uncle Dick's talk!" They rode for some moments in silence; Key preoccupied and feverish, and eager only to reach Skinner's. Skinner was not only postmaster but "registrar" of the district, and the new discoverer did not feel entirely safe until he had put his formal notification and claims "on record." This was no publication of his actual secret, nor any indication of success, but was only a record that would in all probability remain unnoticed and unchallenged amidst the many other hopeful dreams of sanguine prospectors. But he was suddenly startled from his preoccupation.

"Ye said ye war straightenin' up yer pack just now," said Collinson slowly.

"Yes!" said Key almost angrily, "and I was."

"Ye did n't stop to straighten it up down at the forks of the trail, did ye?"

"I may have," said Key nervously. "But why?"

"Ye won't mind my axin' ye another question, will ye? Ye ain't carryin' round with ye no woman's shoe?"

Key felt the blood drop from his cheeks.

"What do you mean?" he stammered, scarcely daring to lift his conscious eyelids to his companion's glance. But when he did so he was amazed to find that Collinson's face was almost as much disturbed as his own.

"I know it ain't the square thing to ask ye, but this is how it is," said Collinson hesitatingly. "Ye see just down by the fork of the trail where you came I picked up a woman's shoe. It sorter got me! For I sez to myself, 'Thar ain't no one bin by my shanty, comin' or goin', for weeks but you boys, and that shoe, from the looks of it, ain't bin there as many hours.' I knew there was n't any wimin hereabouts. I reckoned it could n't hev bin dropped by Uncle Dick or that other man, for you would have seen it on the road. So I allowed it might have bin *you*. And yer it is." He slowly drew from his pocket — what Key was fully prepared to see — the mate of the slipper Key had in his saddle-bags! The fair fugitive had evidently lost them both.

But Key was better prepared now (perhaps this kind of dissimulation is progressive), and quickly alive to the necessity of throwing Collinson off this unexpected scent. And his companion's own suggestion was right to his hand, and, as it seemed, again quite providential! He laughed, with a quick color, which, however, appeared to help his lie, as he replied half hysterically. "You 're right, old man, I own up, it 's mine! It 's d—d silly, I know — but then, we 're all fools where women are concerned — and I would n't have lost that slipper for a mint of money."

He held out his hand gayly, but Collinson retained the slipper while he gravely examined it.

"You would n't mind telling me where you mought hev got that?" he said meditatively.

"Of course I should mind," said Key with a well-affected mingling of mirth and indignation. "What are you thinking of, you old rascal? What do you take me for?"

But Collinson did not laugh. "You would n't mind givin' me the size and shape and general heft of her as wore that shoe?"

"Most decidedly I should do nothing of the kind!" said Key half impatiently. "Enough, that it was given to me by a very pretty girl. There! that 's all you will know."

"*Given* to you ?" said Collinson, lifting his eyes.

"Yes," returned Key sharply.

Collinson handed him the slipper gravely. "I only asked you," he said slowly, but with a certain quiet dignity which Key had never before seen in his face, "because thar was suthin' about the size, and shape, and fillin' out o' that shoe that kinder reminded me of some 'un ; but that some 'un — her as mought hev stood up in that shoe — ain't o' that kind as would ever stand in the shoes of her as *you* know at all."

The rebuke, if such were intended, lay quite as much in the utter ignoring of Key's airy gallantry and levity as in any conscious slur upon the fair fame of his invented Dulcinea. Yet Key oddly felt a strong inclination to resent the aspersion as well as Collinson's gratuitous morality ; and with a mean recollection of Uncle Dick's last evening's scandalous gossip, he said sarcastically, "And, of course, that some one *you* were thinking of was your lawful wife."

"It war !" said Collinson gravely.

Perhaps it was something in Collinson's manner, or his own preoccupation, but he did not pursue the subject, and the conversation lagged. They were nearing, too, the outer edge of the present conflagration, and the smoke, lying low in the unburnt woods, or creeping like an actual exhalation of the soil, blinded them so that at times they lost the trail completely. At other times, from the intense heat, it seemed as if they were momentarily impinging upon the burning area, or were being caught in a closing circle. It was remarkable that with his sudden accession of fortune Key seemed to lose his usual frank and careless fearlessness, and impatiently questioned his companion's wood-craft. There were intervals when he regretted his haste to reach Skinner's by this shorter cut, and began to bitterly attribute it to his desire to serve Collinson. Ah, yes ! it would be fine indeed, if just as he were about to clutch the prize he should be sacrificed through the ignorance and stupidity of this heavy-handed moralist at his side! But it was not until, through that moralist's guidance, they climbed a steep acclivity to a second ridge, and were comparatively safe, that he began to feel ashamed of his surly silence or surlier interruptions. And Collinson, either through his unconquerable patience, or possibly in a fit of his usual uxorious abstraction, appeared to take no notice of it.

A sloping table-land of weather-beaten boulders now effectually separated them from the fire on the lower ridge. They presently began to descend on the further side of the crest, and at last dropped upon a wagon-road, and the first track of wheels that Key had seen for a fortnight. Rude as it was, it seemed to him the highway to fortune, for he knew that it passed Skinner's and then joined the great stage-road to Marysville, — now his ultimate destination. A few rods further on they came in view of Skinner's, lying like a dingy forgotten winter snowdrift on the mountain shelf.

It contained a post-office, tavern, blacksmith's shop, "general store," and express-office, scarcely a dozen buildings in all, but all differing from Collinson's Mill in some vague suggestion of vitality, as if the daily regular pulse of civilization still beat, albeit languidly, in that remote extremity. There was anticipation and accomplishment twice a day; and as Key and Collinson rode up to the express-office, the express-wagon was standing before the door ready to start to meet the stagecoach at the cross-roads three miles away. This again seemed a special providence to Key. He had a brief official communication with Skinner as registrar, and duly recorded his claim; he had a hasty and confidential aside with Skinner as general storekeeper, and such was the unconscious magnetism developed by this embryo millionaire that Skinner extended the necessary credit to Collinson on Key's word alone. That done, he rejoined Collinson in high spirits with the news, addin cheerfully, "And I dare say, if you want any further advances Skinner will give them to you on Parker's draft."

"You mean that bit o' paper that chap left," said Collinson gravely.

"Yes."

"I tore it up."

"You tore it up?" ejaculated Key.

"You hear me? Yes!" said Collinson.

Key stared at him. Surely it was again providential that he had not intrusted his secret to this utterly ignorant and prejudiced man! The slight twinges of conscience that his lie about the slippers had caused him disappeared at once. He could not have trusted him even in that; it would have been like this stupid fanatic to have prevented Key's preëmption of that claim, until he, Collinson, had satisfied himself of the whereabouts of the missing proprietor. Was he quite sure that Collinson would not revisit the spot when he had gone? But he was ready for the emergency.

He had intended to leave his horse with Skinner as security for Collinson's provisions, but Skinner's liberality had made this unnecessary, and he now offered it to Collinson to use and keep for him until called for. This would enable his companion to "pack" his goods on the mule, and oblige him to return to the mill by the wagon-road and "outside trail," as more commodious for the two animals.

"Ye ain't afeard o' the road-agents?" suggested a bystander; "they just swarm on Galloper's Ridge, and they 'held up' the down stage only last week."

"They 're not so lively since the deputy-sheriff 's got new idea about them, and has been lying low in the brush near Bald Top," returned Skinner. "Anyhow, they don't stop teams nor 'packs' unless there 's a chance of their getting some fancy horseflesh by it; and I reckon thar ain't much to tempt them thar," he added, with a satirical side glance at his customer's cattle. But Key was already standing in the express-wagon, giving a farewell shake to his patient companion's hand, and this ingenuous pleasantry passed unnoticed. Nevertheless, as the express-wagon rolled away, his active fancy began to consider this new danger that might threaten the hidden wealth of his claim. But he reflected that for a time, at least, only the crude ore would be taken out and shipped to Marysville in a shape that offered no profit to the highwaymen. Had it been a gold mine! — but here again was the interposition of Providence!

A week later Preble Key returned to Skinner's with a foreman and ten men, and an unlimited credit to draw upon at Marysville! Expeditions of this kind created no surprise at Skinner's. Parties had before this entered the wilderness gayly, none knew where or what for; the sedate and silent woods had kept their secret while there; they had evaporated, none knew when or where — often, alas! with an unpaid account at Skinner's. Consequently, there was nothing in Key's party to challenge curiosity. In another week a rambling, one-storied shed of pine logs occupied the site of the mysterious ruins, and contained the party; in two weeks excavations had been made, and the whole face of the outcrop was exposed; in three weeks every vestige of former tenancy which the fire had not consumed was trampled out by the alien feet of these toilers of the "Sylvan Silver Hollow Company." None of Key's former companions would have recognized the hollow in its blackened leveling and rocky foundation; even Collinson would not have remembered this stripped and splintered rock, with its heaps of fresh débris, as the place where he had overtaken Key. And Key himself had forgotten, in his triumph, everything but the chance experiment that had led to his success.

Perhaps it was well, therefore, that one night, when the darkness had mercifully fallen upon this scene of sylvan desolation, and its still more incongruous and unsavory human restoration, and the low murmur of the pines occasionally swelled up from the unscathed mountain-side, a loud shout and the trampling of horses' feet awoke the dwellers in the shanty. Springing to their feet, they hurriedly seized their weapons and rushed out, only to be confronted by a dark, motionless ring of horsemen, two flaming torches of pine knots, and a low but distinct voice of authority. In their excitement, half-awakened suspicion, and confusion, they were affected by its note of calm preparation and conscious power.

"Drop those guns — hold up your hands! We've got every man of you covered."

Key was no coward; the men, though flustered, were not cravens: but they obeyed.

"Trot out your leader! Let him stand out there, clear, beside that torch!"

One of the gleaming pine knots disengaged itself from the dark circle and moved to the centre, as Preble Key, cool and confident, stepped beside it.

"That will do," said the immutable voice. "Now, we want Jack Riggs, Sydney Jack, French Pete, and One-eyed Charley."

A vivid reminiscence of the former night scene in the hollow — of his own and his companions' voices raised in the darkness — flashed across Key. With an instinctive premonition that this invasion had something to do with the former tenant, he said calmly: —

"*Who* wants them?"

"The State of California," said the voice.

"The State of California must look further," returned Key in his old pleasant voice; "there are no such names among my party."

"Who are you?"

"The manager of the Sylvan Silver Hollow Company, and these are my workmen."

There was a hurried movement, and the sound of whispering in the hitherto dark and silent circle, and then the voice rose again: —

"You have the papers to prove that?"

"Yes, in the cabin. And you?"

"I 've a warrant to the sheriff of Sierra."

There was a pause, and the voice went on less confidently: —

"How long have you been here?"

"Three weeks. I came here the day of the fire and took up this claim."

"There was no other house here?"

"There were ruins, — you can see them still. It may have been a burnt-up cabin."

The voice disengaged itself from the vague background, and came slowly forwards: —

"It was a den of thieves. It was the hiding-place of Jack Riggs and his gang of road-agents. I 've been hunting this spot for three weeks. And now the whole thing 's up!"

There was a laugh from Key's men, but it was checked as the owner of the voice slowly ranged up beside the burning torch and they saw his face. It was dark and set with the defeat of a bravé man.

"Won't you come in and take something?" said Key kindly.

"No. It 's enough fool work for me to have routed ye out already. But I suppose it 's all in my d—d day's work! Good-night! Forward there! Get!"

The two torches danced forwards, with the trailing off of vague shadows in dim procession; there was a clatter over the rocks and they were gone. Then, as Preble Key gazed after them, he felt that with them had passed the only shadow that lay upon his great fortune; and with the last tenant of the hollow a proscribed outlaw and fugitive, he was henceforth forever safe in his claim and his discovery. And yet, oddly enough, at that moment, as he turned away, for the first time in three weeks there passed before his fancy with a stirring of reproach a vision of the face that he had seen at the window.

CHAPTER III

Of the great discovery in Sylvan Silver Hollow it would seem that Collinson as yet knew nothing. In spite of Key's fears that he might stray there on his return from Skinner's, he did not, nor did he afterwards revisit the locality. Neither the news of the registry of the claim nor the arrival of Key's workmen ever reached him. The few travelers who passed his mill came from the valley to cross the Divide on their way to Skinner's, and returned by the longer but easier détour of the stage-road over Galloper's Ridge. He had no chance to participate in the prosperity that flowed from the opening of the mine, which plentifully besprinkled Skinner's settlement; he was too far away to profit even by the chance custom of Key's Sabbath-wandering workmen. His isolation from civilization (for those who came to him from the valley were rude Western emigrants like himself) remained undisturbed. The return of the prospecting party to his humble hospitality that night had been an exceptional case; in his characteristic simplicity he did not dream that it was because they had nowhere else to go in their penniless condition. It was an incident to be pleasantly remembered, but whose nonrecurrence did not disturb his infinite patience. His pork barrel and flour sack had been replenished for other travelers; his own wants were few.

It was a day or two after the midnight visit of the sheriff to Silver Hollow that Key galloped down the steep grade to Collinson's. He was amused, albeit, in his new importance, a little aggrieved also, to find that Collinson had as usual confounded his descent with that of the generally detached boulder, and that he was obliged to add his voice to the general uproar. This brought Collinson to his door.

"I 've had your hoss hobbled out among the chickweed and clover in the green pasture back o' the mill, and he 's picked up that much that he 's lookin' fat and sassy," he said quietly, beginning to mechanically unstrap Key's bridle, even while his guest was in the act of dismounting. "His back 's quite healed up."

Key could not restrain a shrug of impatience. It was three weeks since they had met, — three weeks crammed with excitement, energy, achievement, and fortune to Key; and yet this place and this man were as stupidly unchanged as when he had left them. A momentary fancy that this was the reality, that he himself was only awakening from some delusive dream, came over him. But Collinson's next words were practical.

"I reckoned that maybe you 'd write from Marysville to Skinner to send for the hoss, and forward him to ye, for I never kalkilated you 'd come back."

It was quite plain from this that Collinson had heard nothing. But it was also awkward, as Key would now have to tell the whole story, and reveal the fact that he had been really experimenting when Collinson overtook him in the hollow. He evaded this by post-dating his discovery of the richness of the ore until he had reached Marysville. But he found some difficulty in recounting his good fortune: he was naturally no boaster, he had no desire to impress Collinson with his penetration, nor the undaunted energy he had displayed in getting up his company and opening the mine, so that he was actually embarrassed by his own understatement; and under the grave, patient eyes of his companion, told his story at best lamely. Collinson's face betrayed neither profound interest nor the slightest resentment. When Key had ended his awkward recital, Collinson said slowly: —

"Then Uncle Dick and that other Parker feller ain't got no show in this yer find?"

"No," said Key quickly. "Don't you remember we broke up our partnership that morning and went off our own ways. You don't suppose," he added with a forced half-laugh, "that if Uncle Dick or Parker had struck a lead after they had left me, they 'd have put me in it?"

"Would n't they?" asked Collinson gravely.

"Of course not." He laughed a little more naturally, but presently added, with an uneasy smile, "What makes you think they would?"

"Nuthin'!" said Collinson promptly.

Nevertheless, when they were seated before the fire, with glasses in their hands, Collinson returned patiently to the subject: —

"You wuz saying they went their way, and you went yours. But your way was back on the old way that you 'd all gone together."

But Key felt himself on firmer ground here, and answered deliberately and truthfully, "Yes, but I only went back to the hollow to satisfy myself if there really was any house there, and if there was, to warn the occupants of the approaching fire."

"And there was a house there," said Collinson thoughtfully.

"Only the ruins." He stopped and flushed quickly, for he remembered that he had denied its existence at their former meeting. "That is," he went on hurriedly, "I found out from the sheriff, you know, that there had been a house there. But," he added, reverting to his stronger position, "my going back there was an accident, and my picking up the outcrop was an accident, and had no more to do with our partnership prospecting than you had. In fact," he said, with a reassuring laugh, "you 'd have had a better right to share in my claim, coming there as you did at that moment, than they. Why, if I'd have known what the thing was worth, I might have put you in — only it wanted capital and some experience." He was glad that he had pitched upon that excuse (it had only just occurred to him), and glanced affably at Collinson. But that gentleman said soberly: —

"No, you would n't nuther."

"Why not?" said Key half angrily.

Collinson paused. After a moment he said, "'Cos I would n't hev took anything outer thet place."

Key felt relieved. From what he knew of Collinson's vagaries he believed him. He was wise in not admitting him to his confidences at the beginning; he might have thought it his duty to tell others.

"I'm not so particular," he returned laughingly, "but the silver in that hole was never touched, nor I dare say even imagined by mortal man before. However, there is something else about the hollow that I want to tell you. You remember the slipper that you picked up?"

"Yes."

"Well, I lied to you about that; I never dropped it. On the contrary, I had picked up the mate of it very near where you found yours, and I wanted to know to whom it belonged. For I don't mind telling you now, Collinson, that I believe there *was* a woman in that house, and the same woman whose face I saw at the window. You remember how the boys joked me about it — well, perhaps I did n't care that you should laugh at me too, but I 've had a sore conscience over my lie, for I remembered that you seemed to have some interest in the matter too, and I thought that maybe I might have thrown you off the scent. It seemed to me that if you had any idea who it was, we might now talk the matter over and compare notes. I think you said — at least, I gathered the idea from a remark of yours," he added hastily, as he remembered that the suggestion was his own, and a satirical one — "that it reminded you of your wife's slipper. Of course, as your wife is dead, that would offer no clue, and can only be a chance resemblance, unless" — He stopped.

"Have you got 'em yet?"

"Yes, both." He took them from the pocket of his riding-jacket.

As Collinson received them, his face took upon itself an even graver expression. "It 's mighty cur'ous," he said reflectively, "but looking at the two of 'em the likeness is more fetchin'. Ye see, my wife had a *straight* foot, and never wore reg'lar rights and lefts like other women, but kinder changed about; ye see, these shoes is reg'lar rights and lefts, but never was worn as sich!"

"There may be other women as peculiar," suggested Key.

"There *must* be," said Collinson quietly.

For an instant Key was touched with the manly security of the reply, for, remembering Uncle Dick's scandal, it had occurred to him that the unknown tenant of the robbers' den might be Collinson's wife. He was glad to be relieved on that point, and went on more confidently: —

"So, you see, this woman was undoubtedly in that house on the night of the fire. She escaped, and in a mighty hurry too, for she had not time to change her slippers for shoes; she escaped on horseback, for that is how she lost them. Now what was she doing there with those rascals, for the face I saw looked as innocent as a saint's."

"Seemed to ye sort o' contrairy, jist as I reckoned my wife's foot would have looked in a slipper that you said was *giv* to ye," suggested Collinson pointedly, but with no implication of reproach in his voice.

"Yes," said Key impatiently.

"I 've read yarns afore now about them Eyetalian brigands stealin' women," said Collinson reflectively, "but that ain't California road-agent style. Great Scott! if one even so much as spoke to a woman, they 'd have been wiped outer the State long ago. No! the woman as *was* there came there to *stay!*"

As Key's face did not seem to express either assent or satisfaction at this last statement, Collinson, after a glance at it, went on with a somewhat gentler gravity: "I see wot 's troublin' *you*, Mr. Key; you 've bin thinkin' that mebbee that poor woman might hev bin the better for a bit o' that fortin' that you discovered under the very spot where them slippers of hers had often trod. You 're thinkin' that mebbee it might hev turned her and those men from their evil ways."

Mr. Key had been thinking nothing of the kind, but for some obscure reason the skeptical jeer that had risen to his lips remained unsaid. He rose impatiently. "Well, there seems to be no chance of discovering anything now; the house is burnt, the gang dispersed, and she has probably gone with them." He paused, and then laid three or four large gold-pieces on the table. "It 's for that old bill of our party, Collinson," he said. "I 'll settle and collect from each. Some time when you come over to the mine, and I hope you 'll give us a call, you can bring the horse. Meanwhile you can use him; you 'll find he 's a little quicker than the mule. How is business?" he added, with a perfunctory glance around the vacant room and dusty bar.

"Thar ain't much passin' this way," said Collinson with equal carelessness, as he gathered up the money, "'cept those boys from the valley, and they 're most always strapped when they come here."

Key smiled as he observed that Collinson offered him no receipt, and, moreover, as he remembered that he had only Collinson's word for the destruction of Parker's draft. But he merely glanced at his unconscious host, and said nothing.

After a pause he returned in a lighter tone: "I suppose you *are* rather out of the world here. Indeed, I had an idea at first of buying out your mill, Collinson, and putting in steam power to get out timber for our new buildings, but you see you are so far away from the wagon-road that we could n't haul the timber away. That was the trouble, or I 'd have made you a fair offer."

"I don't reckon to ever sell the mill," said Collinson simply. Then observing the look of suspicion in his companion's face, he added gravely, "You see, I rigged up the whole thing when I expected my wife out from the States, and I calkilate to keep it in memory of her."

Key slightly lifted his brows. "But you never told us, by the way, *how* you ever came to put up a mill here with such an uncertain water-supply."

"It was n't onsartin when I came here, Mr. Key; it was a full-fed stream straight from them snow peaks. It was the earthquake did it."

"The earthquake!" repeated Key.

"Yes. Ef the earthquake kin heave up that silver-bearing rock that you told us about the first day you kem here, and that you found t' other day, it could play roots with a mere mill-stream, I reckon."

"But the convulsion I spoke of happened ages on ages ago, when this whole mountain range was being fashioned," said Key with a laugh.

"Well, this yer earthquake was ten years ago, just after I came. I reckon I oughter remember it. It was a queer sort o' day in the fall, dry and hot as if thar might hev bin a fire in the woods, only thar was n't no wind. Not a breath of air anywhar. The leaves of them alders hung straight as a plumb-line. Except for that thar stream and that thar wheel, nuthin' moved. Thar was n't a bird on the wing over that cañon; thar was n't a squirrel skirmishin' in the hull wood; even the lizards in the rocks stiffened like stone Chinese idols. It kept gettin' quieter and quieter, ontil I walked out on that ledge and felt as if I 'd have to give a yell just to hear my own voice. Thar was a thin veil over everything, and betwixt and between everything, and the sun was rooted in the middle of it as if it could n't move neither. Everythin' seemed to be waitin', waitin', waitin'. Then all of a suddin suthin' seemed to give somewhar! Suthin' fetched away with a queer sort of rumblin', as if the peg had slipped outer creation. I looked up and kalkilated to see half a dozen of them boulders come, lickity switch, down the grade. But, darn my skin, if one of 'em stirred! and yet while I was looking, the whole face o' that bluff bowed over softly, as if saying 'Good-by,' and got clean away somewhar before I knowed it. Why, you see that pile agin the side o' the cañon? Well, a thousand feet under that there's trees, three hundred feet high, still upright and standin'. You know how them pines over on that far mountain-side always seem to be climbin' up, up, up, over each other's heads, to the very top? Well, Mr. Key, *I saw 'em* climbin'! And when I pulled myself together and got back to the mill, everything was quiet; and, by G—d, so was the mill-wheel, and there was n't two inches of water in the river!"

"And what did you think of it?" said Key, interested in spite of his impatience.

"I thought, Mr. Key — no! I must n't say I thought, for I knowed it, — I knowed that suthin' had happened to my wife!"

Key did not smile, but even felt a faint superstitious thrill as he gazed at him. After a pause Collinson resumed: "I heard a month after that she had died about that time o' yaller fever in Texas with the party she was comin' with. Her folks wrote that they died like flies, and wuz all buried together, unbeknownst and promiscuous, and thar was n't no remains. She slipped away from me like that bluff over that cañon, and that was the end of it."

"But she might have escaped," said Key quickly, forgetting himself in his eagerness.

But Collinson only shook his head. "Then she'd have been here," he said gravely.

Key moved towards the door still abstractedly, held out his hand, shook that of his companion warmly, and then, saddling his horse himself, departed. A sense of disappointment — in which a vague dissatisfaction with himself was mingled — was all that had come of his interview. He took himself severely to task for following his romantic quest so far. It was unworthy of the president of the Sylvan Silver Hollow Company, and he was not quite sure but that his confidences with Collinson might have imperiled even the interests of the company. To atone for this momentary aberration, and correct his dismal fancies, he resolved to attend to some business at Skinner's before returning, and branched off on a long détour that would intersect the traveled stage-road. But here a singular incident overtook him. As he wheeled into the turnpike, he heard the trampling hoof-beats and jingling harness of the oncoming coach behind him. He had barely time to draw up against the bank before the six galloping horses and swinging vehicle swept heavily by. He had a quick impression of the heat and steam of sweating horse-hide, the reek of varnish and leather, and the momentary vision of a female face silhouetted against the glass window of the coach! But even in that flash of perception he recognized the profile that he had seen at the window of the mysterious hut!

He halted for an instant dazed and bewildered in the dust of the departing wheels. Then, as the bulk of the vehicle reappeared, already narrowing in the distance, without a second thought he dashed after it. His disappointment, his self-criticism, his practical resolutions were forgotten. He had but one idea now — the vision was providential! The clue to the mystery was before him — he *must* follow it!

Yet he had sense enough to realize that the coach would not stop to take up a passenger between stations, and that the next station was the one three miles below Skinner's. It would not be difficult to reach this by a cut-off in time, and although the vehicle had appeared to be crowded, he could no doubt obtain a seat on top.

His eager curiosity, however, led him to put spurs to his horse, and range up alongside of the coach as if passing it, while he examined the stranger more closely. Her face was bent listlessly over a book; there was unmistakably the same profile that he had seen, but the full face was different in outline and expression. A strange sense of disappointment that was almost a revulsion of feeling came over him; he lingered, he glanced again; she was certainly a very pretty woman: there was the beautifully rounded chin, the short straight nose, and delicately curved upper lip, that he had seen in the profile, — and yet — yet it was not the same face he had dreamt of. With an odd, provoking sense of disillusion, he swept ahead of the coach, and again slackened his speed to let it pass. This time the fair unknown raised her long lashes and gazed suddenly at this persistent horseman at her side, and an odd expression, it seemed to him almost a glance of recognition and expectation, came into her dark, languid eyes. The pupils concentrated upon him with a singular significance, that was almost, he even thought, a reply to his glance, and yet it was as utterly unintelligible. A moment later, however, it was explained. He had fallen slightly behind in a new confusion of hesitation, wonder, and embarrassment, when from a wooded trail to the right another horseman suddenly swept into the road before him. He was a powerfully built man, mounted on a thoroughbred horse of a quality far superior to the ordinary roadster. Without looking at

Key he easily ranged up beside the coach as if to pass it, but Key, with a sudden resolution, put spurs to his own horse and ranged also abreast of him, in time to see his fair unknown start at the apparition of this second horseman and unmistakably convey some signal to him, — a signal that to Key's fancy now betrayed some warning of himself. He was the more convinced as the stranger, after continuing a few paces ahead of the coach, allowed it to pass him at a curve of the road, and slackened his pace to permit Key to do the same. Instinctively conscious that the stranger's object was to scrutinize or identify him, he determined to take the initiative, and fixed his eyes upon him as they approached. But the stranger, who wore a loose brown linen duster over clothes that appeared to be superior in fashion and material, also had part of his face and head draped by a white silk handkerchief worn under his hat, ostensibly to keep the sun and dust from his head and neck, — and had the advantage of him. He only caught the flash of a pair of steel-gray eyes, as the newcomer, apparently having satisfied himself, gave rein to his spirited steed and easily repassed the coach, disappearing in a cloud of dust before it. But Key had by this time reached the cut-off, which the stranger, if he intended to follow the coach, either disdained or was ignorant of, and he urged his horse to its utmost speed. Even with the stranger's advantages it would be a close race to the station.

Nevertheless, as he dashed on, he was by no means insensible to the somewhat quixotic nature of his undertaking. If he was right in his suspicion that a signal had been given by the lady to the stranger, it was exceedingly probable that he had discovered not only the fair inmate of the robbers' den, but one of the gang itself, or at least a confederate and ally. Yet far from deterring him, in that ingenious sophistry with which he was apt to treat his romance, he now looked upon his adventure as a practical pursuit in the interests of law and justice. It was true that it was said that the band of road-agents had been dispersed; it was a fact that there had been no spoliation of coach or teams for three weeks; but none of the depredators had ever been caught, and their booty, which was considerable, was known to be still intact. It was to the interest of the mine, his partners, and his workmen that this clue to a danger which threatened the locality should be followed to the end. As to the lady, in spite of the disappointment that still rankled in his breast, he could be magnanimous! She might be the paramour of the strange horseman, she might be only escaping from some hateful companionship by his aid. And yet one thing puzzled him: she was evidently not acquainted with the personality of the active gang, for she had, without doubt, at first mistaken *him* for one of them, and after recognizing her real accomplice had communicated her mistake to him.

It was a great relief to him when the rough and tangled cut-off at last broadened and lightened into the turnpike road again, and he beheld, scarcely a quarter of a mile before him, the dust cloud that overhung the coach as it drew up at the lonely wayside station. He was in time, for he knew that the horses were changed there; but a sudden fear that the fair unknown might alight, or take some other conveyance, made him still spur his jaded steed forward. As he neared the station he glanced eagerly around for the other horseman, but he was nowhere to be seen. He had evidently either abandoned the chase or ridden ahead.

It seemed equally a part of what he believed was a providential intercession, that on arriving at the station he found there was a vacant seat inside the coach. It was diagonally opposite that occupied by the lady, and he was thus enabled to study her face as it was bent over her book, whose pages, however, she scarcely turned. After her first casual glance of curiosity at the new passenger, she seemed to take no more notice of him, and Key began to wonder if he had not mistaken her previous interrogating look. Nor was it his only disturbing query; he was conscious of the same disappointment now that he could examine her face more attentively, as in his first cursory glance. She was certainly handsome; if there was no longer the freshness of youth, there was still the indefinable charm of the woman of thirty, and with it the delicate curves of matured muliebrity and repose. There were lines, particularly around the mouth and fringed eyelids, that were deepened as by pain; and the chin, even in its rounded fullness, had the angle of determination. From what was visible, below the brown linen duster that she wore, she appeared to be tastefully although not richly dressed.

As the coach at last drove away from the station, a grizzled, farmer-looking man seated beside her uttered a sigh of relief, so palpable as to attract the general attention. Turning to his fair neighbor with a smile of uncouth but good-humored apology, he said in explanation: —

"You 'll excuse me, miss! I don't know ezactly how *you* 're feelin', — for judging from your looks and gin'ral gait, you 're a stranger in these parts, — but ez for *me*, I don't mind sayin' that I never feel ezactly safe from these yer road-agents and stage-robbers ontil arter we pass Skinner's station. All along thet Galloper's Ridge it 's jest tech and go like; the woods is swarmin' with 'em. But once past Skinner's, you 're all right. They never dare go below that. So ef you don't mind, miss, for it 's bein' in your presence, I 'll jest pull off my butes and ease my feet for a spell."

Neither the inconsequence of this singular request, nor the smile it evoked on the faces of the other passengers, seemed to disturb the lady's abstraction. Scarcely lifting her eyes from her book, she bowed a grave assent.

"You see, miss," he continued, "and you, gents," he added, taking the whole coach into his confidence, "I 've got over forty ounces of clean gold-dust in them butes, between the upper and lower sole,—and it 's mighty tight packing for my feet. Ye kin heft it," he said, as he removed one boot and held it up before them. "I put the dust there for safety—kalkilatin' that while these road gentry allus goes for a man's pockets and his body belt, they never thinks of his butes, or have n't time to go through 'em." He looked around him with a smile of self-satisfaction.

The murmur of admiring comment was, however, broken by a burly-bearded miner who sat in the middle seat. "Thet 's pretty fair, as far as it goes," he said smilingly, "but I reckon it would n't go far ef you started to run. I 've got a simpler game than that, gentlemen, and ez we 're all friends here, and the danger 's over, I don't mind tellin' ye. The first thing these yer road-agents do, after they 've covered the driver with their shot-guns, is to make the passengers get out and hold up their hands. That, ma'am,"—explanatorily to the lady, who betrayed only a languid interest,—"is to keep 'em from drawing their revolvers. A revolver is the last thing a road-agent wants, either in a man's hand or in his holster. So I sez to myself, 'Ef a six-shooter ain't of no account, wot 's the use of carryin' it?' So I just put my shooting-iron in my valise when I travel, and fill my holster with my gold-dust, so! It 's a deuced sight heavier than a revolver, but they don't feel its weight, and don't keer to come nigh it. And I 've been held up twice on t' other side of the Divide this year, and I passed free every time!"

The applause that followed this revelation and the exhibition of the holster not only threw the farmer's exploits into the shade, but seemed to excite an emulation among the passengers. Other methods of securing their property were freely discussed; but the excitement culminated in the leaning forward of a passenger who had, up to that moment, maintained a reserve almost equal to the fair unknown. His dress and general appearance were those of a professional man; his voice and manner corroborated the presumption.

"I don't think, gentlemen," he began with a pleasant smile, "that any man of us here would like to be called a coward; but in fighting with an enemy who never attacks, or even appears, except with a deliberately prepared advantage on his side, it is my opinion that a man is not only justified in avoiding an unequal encounter with him, but in circumventing by every means the object of his attack. You have all been frank in telling your methods. I will be equally so in telling mine, even if I have perhaps to confess to a little more than you have; for I have not only availed myself of a well-known rule of the robbers who infest these mountains, to exempt all women and children from their spoliation, — a rule which, of course, they perfectly understand gives them a sentimental consideration with all Californians, — but I have, I confess, also availed myself of the innocent kindness of one of that charming and justly exempted sex." He paused and bowed courteously to the fair unknown. "When I entered this coach I had with me a bulky parcel which was manifestly too large for my pockets, yet as evidently too small and too valuable to be intrusted to the ordinary luggage. Seeing my difficulty, our charming companion opposite, out of the very kindness and innocence of her heart, offered to make a place for it in her satchel, which was not full. I accepted the offer joyfully. When I state to you, gentlemen, that that package contained valuable government bonds to a considerable amount, I do so, not to claim your praise for any originality of my own, but to make this public avowal to our fair fellow passenger for securing to me this most perfect security and immunity from the road-agent that has been yet recorded."

With his eyes riveted on the lady's face, Key saw a faint color rise to her otherwise impassive face, which might have been called out by the enthusiastic praise that followed the lawyer's confession. But he was painfully conscious of what now seemed to him a monstrous situation! Here was, he believed, the actual accomplice of the road-agents calmly receiving the complacent and puerile confessions of the men who were seeking to outwit them. Could he, in ordinary justice to them, to himself, or the mission he conceived he was pursuing, refrain from exposing her, or warning them privately? But was he certain? Was a vague remembrance of a profile momentarily seen — and, as he must even now admit, inconsistent with the full face he was gazing at — sufficient for such an accusation? More than that, was the protection she had apparently afforded the lawyer consistent with the function of an accomplice!

"Then, if the danger's over," said the lady gently, reaching down to draw her satchel from under the seat, "I suppose I may return it to you."

"By no means! Don't trouble yourself! Pray allow me to still remain your debtor, — at least as far as the next station," said the lawyer gallantly.

The lady uttered a languid sigh, sank back in her seat, and calmly settled herself to the perusal of her book. Key felt his cheeks beginning to burn with the embarrassment and shame of his evident misconception. And here he was on his way to Marysville, to follow a woman for whom he felt he no longer cared, and for whose pursuit he had no longer the excuse of justice.

"Then I understand that you have twice seen these road-agents," said the professional man, turning to the miner. "Of course, you would be able to identify them?"

"Nary a man! You see they 're all masked, and only one of 'em ever speaks."

"The leader or chief?"

"No, the orator."

"The orator?" repeated the professional man in amazement.

"Well, you see, *I* call him the orator, for he 's mighty glib with his tongue, and reels off all he has to say like as if he had it by heart. He 's mighty rough on you, too, sometimes, for all his high-toned style. Ef he thinks a man is hidin' anything he jest scalps him with his tongue, and blamed if I don't think he likes the chance of doin' it. He 's got a regular set speech, and he 's bound to go through it all, even if he makes everything wait, and runs the risk of capture. Yet he ain't the chief — and even I 've heard folks say ain't got any responsibility if he is took, for he don't tech anybody or anybody's money; and could n't be prosecuted. I reckon he 's some sort of a broken-down lawyer — d' ye see?"

"Not much of a lawyer, I imagine," said the professional man, smiling, "for he 'll find himself quite mistaken as to his share of responsibility. But it 's a rather clever way of concealing the identity of the real leader."

"It 's the smartest gang that was ever started in the Sierras. They fooled the sheriff of Sierra the other day. They gave him a sort of idea that they had a kind of hidin'-place in the woods whar they met and kept their booty, and by jinks! he goes down thar with his hull posse, — just spilin' for a fight, — and only lights upon a gang of innocent greenhorns, who were boring for silver on the very spot where he allowed the robbers had their den! He ain't held up his head since."

Key cast a quick glance at the lady to see the effect of this revelation. But her face — if the same profile he had seen at the window — betrayed neither concern nor curiosity. He let his eyes drop to the smart boot that peeped from below her gown, and the thought of his trying to identify it with the slipper he had picked up seemed to him as ridiculous as his other misconceptions. He sank back gloomily in his seat; by degrees the fatigue and excitement of the day began to mercifully benumb his senses; twilight had fallen and the talk had ceased. The lady had allowed her book to drop in her lap as the darkness gathered, and had closed her eyes; he closed his own, and slipped away presently into a dream, in which he saw the profile again as he had seen it in the darkness of the hollow, only that this time it changed to a full face, unlike the lady's or any one he had ever seen. Then the window seemed to open with a rattle, and he again felt the cool odors of the forest; but he awoke to find that the lady had only opened her window for a breath of fresh air. It was nearly eight o'clock; it would be an hour yet before the coach stopped at the next station for supper; the passengers were drowsily nodding; he closed his eyes and fell into a deeper sleep, from which he awoke with a start.

The coach had stopped!

CHAPTER IV

"It can't be Three Pines yet," said a passenger's voice, in which the laziness of sleep still lingered, "or else we 've snoozed over five mile. I don't see no lights; wot are we stoppin' for?" The other passengers struggled to an upright position. One nearest the window opened it; its place was instantly occupied by the double muzzle of a shot-gun! No one moved. In the awe-stricken silence the voice of the driver rose in drawling protestation.

"It ain't no business o' mine, but it sorter strikes me that you chaps are a-playin' it just a little too fine this time! It ain't three miles from Three Pine Station and forty men! Of course, that 's your lookout, — not mine!"

The audacity of the thing had evidently struck even the usually taciturn and phlegmatic driver into his first expostulation on record.

"Your thoughtful consideration does you great credit," said a voice from the darkness, "and shall be properly presented to our manager; but at the same time we wish it understood that we do not hesitate to take any risks in strict attention to our business and our clients. In the mean time you will expedite matters, and give your passengers a chance to get an early tea at Three Pines, by handing down that treasure-box and mail-pouch. Be careful in handling that blunderbuss you keep beside it; the last time, it unfortunately went off, and I regret to say slightly wounded one of your passengers. Accidents of this kind, interfering, as they do, with the harmony and pleasure of our chance meetings, cannot be too highly deplored."

"By gosh!" ejaculated an outside passenger in an audible whisper.

"Thank you, sir," said the voice quietly; "but as I overlooked you, I will trouble you now to descend with the others."

The voice moved nearer; and, by the light of a flaming bull's-eye cast upon the coach, it could be seen to come from a stout, medium-sized man with a black mask, which, however, showed half of a smooth, beardless face, and an affable yet satirical mouth. The speaker cleared his throat with the slight preparatory cough of the practiced orator, and, approaching the window, to Key's intense surprise, actually began in the identical professional and rhetorical style previously indicated by the miner.

"Circumstances over which we have no control, gentlemen, compel us to oblige you to alight, stand in a row on one side, and hold up your hands. You will find the attitude not unpleasant after your cramped position in the coach, while the change from its confined air to the wholesome night-breeze of the Sierras cannot but prove salutary and refreshing. It will also enable us to relieve you of such so-called valuables and treasures in the way of gold-dust and coin, which I regret to say too often are misapplied in careless hands, and which the teachings of the highest morality distinctly denominate as the root of all evil! I need not inform you, gentlemen, as business men, that promptitude and celerity of compliance will insure dispatch, and shorten an interview which has been sometimes needlessly, and, I regret to say, painfully protracted."

He drew back deliberately with the same monotonous precision of habit, and disclosed the muzzles of his confederates' weapons still leveled at the passengers. In spite of their astonishment, indignation, and discomfiture, his practiced effrontery and deliberate display appeared in some way to touch their humorous sense, and one or two smiled hysterically, as they rose and hesitatingly filed out of the vehicle. It is possible, however, that the leveled shot-guns contributed more or less directly to this result.

Two masks began to search the passengers under the combined focus of the bull's-eyes, the shining gun-barrels, and a running but still carefully prepared commentary from the spokesman.

"It is to be regretted that business men, instead of intrusting their property to the custody of the regularly constituted express-agent, still continue to secrete it on their persons; a custom that, without enhancing its security, is not only an injustice to the express-company, but a great detriment to dispatch. We also wish to point out that while we do not as a rule interfere with the possession of articles of ordinary personal use or adornment, such as simple jewelry or watches, we reserve our right to restrict by confiscation the vulgarity and unmanliness of diamonds and enormous fob-chains."

The act of spoliation was apparently complete, yet it was evident that the orator was restraining himself for a more effective climax. Clearing his throat again and stepping before the impatient but still mystified file of passengers, he reviewed them gravely. Then in a perfectly pitched tone of mingled pain and apology, he said slowly: —

"It would seem that, from no wish of our own, we are obliged on this present occasion to suspend one or two of our usual rules. We are not in the habit of interfering with the wearing apparel of our esteemed clients; but in the interests of ordinary humanity we are obliged to remove the boots of the gentleman on the extreme left, which evidently give him great pain and impede his locomotion. We also seldom deviate from our rule of obliging our clients to hold up their hands during this examination; but we gladly make an exception in favor of the gentleman next to him, and permit him to hand us the altogether too heavily weighted holster which presses upon his hip. Gentlemen," said the orator, slightly raising his voice, with a deprecating gesture, "you need not be alarmed! The indignant movement of our friend, just now, was not to draw his revolver, — for it is n't there!" He paused while his companions speedily removed the farmer's boots and the miner's holster, and with a still more apologetic air approached the coach, where only the lady remained erect and rigid in her corner. "And now," he said with simulated hesitation, "we come to the last and to us the most painful suspension of our rules. On those very rare occasions when we have been honored with the presence of the fair sex, it has been our invariable custom not only to leave them in the undisturbed possession of their property, but even of their privacy as well. It is with deep regret that on this occasion we are obliged to make an exception. For in the present instance, the lady, out of the gentleness of her heart and the politeness of her sex, has burdened herself not only with the weight but the responsibility of a package forced upon her by one of the passengers. We feel, and we believe, gentlemen, that most of you will agree with us, that so scandalous and unmanly an attempt to evade our rules and violate the sanctity of the lady's immunity will never be permitted. For your own sake, madam, we are compelled to ask you for the satchel under your seat. It will be returned to you when the package is removed."

"One moment," said the professional man indignantly, "there is a man here whom you have spared, — a man who lately joined us. Is that man," pointing to the astonished Key, "one of your confederates?"

"That man," returned the spokesman with a laugh, "is the owner of the Sylvan Hollow Mine. We have spared him because we owe him some consideration for having been turned out of his house at the dead of night while the sheriff of Sierra was seeking us."

He stopped, and then in an entirely different voice, and in a totally changed manner, said roughly, "Tumble in there, all of you, quick! And you, sir" (to Key), — "I'd advise you to ride outside. Now, driver, raise so much as a rein or a whiplash until you hear the signal — and by God! you'll know what next."

He stepped back, and seemed to be instantly swallowed up in the darkness; but the light of a solitary bull's-eye — the holder himself invisible — still showed the muzzles of the guns covering the driver. There was a momentary stir of voices within the closed coach, but an angry roar of "Silence!" from the darkness hushed it.

The moments crept slowly by; all now were breathless. Then a clear whistle rang from the distance, the light suddenly was extinguished, the leveled muzzles vanished with it, the driver's lash fell simultaneously on the backs of his horses, and the coach leaped forward.

The jolt nearly threw Key from the top, but a moment later it was still more difficult to keep his seat in the headlong fury of their progress. Again and again the lash descended upon the maddened horses, until the whole coach seemed to leap, bound, and swerve with every stroke. Cries of protest and even distress began to come from the interior, but the driver heeded it not. A window was suddenly let down; the voice of the professional man saying, "What's the matter? We're not followed. You are imperiling our lives by this speed," was answered only by, "Will some of ye throttle that d—d fool?" from the driver, and the renewed fall of the lash.

The wayside trees appeared a solid plateau before them, opened, danced at their side, closed up again behind them, — but still they sped along. Rushing down grades with the speed of an avalanche, they ascended again without drawing rein, and as if by sheer momentum; for the heavy vehicle now seemed to have a diabolical energy of its own.

It ground scattered rocks to powder with its crushing wheels, it swayed heavily on ticklish corners, recovering itself with the resistless forward propulsion of the straining teams, until the lights of Three Pine Station began to glitter through the trees. Then a succession of yells broke from the driver, so strong and dominant that they seemed to outstrip even the speed of the unabated cattle. Lesser lights were presently seen running to and fro, and on the outermost fringe of the settlement the stage pulled up before a crowd of wondering faces, and the driver spoke.

"We 've been held up on the open road, by G—d, not *three miles* from whar ye men are sittin' here yawpin' ! If thar 's a man among ye that has n't got the soul of a skunk, he 'll foller and close in upon 'em before they have a chance to get into the brush."

Having thus relieved himself of his duty as an enforced noncombatant, and allowed all further responsibility to devolve upon his recreant fellow employees, he relapsed into his usual taciturnity, and drove a trifle less recklessly to the station, where he grimly set down his bruised and discomfited passengers. As Key mingled with them, he could not help perceiving that neither the late "orator's" explanation of his exemption from their fate, nor the driver's surly corroboration of his respectability, had pacified them. For a time this amused him, particularly as he could not help remembering that he first appeared to them beside the mysterious horseman who some one thought had been identified as one of the masks. But he was not a little piqued to find that the fair unknown appeared to participate in their feelings, and his first civility to her met with a chilling response. Even then, in the general disillusion of his romance regarding her, this would have been only a momentary annoyance; but it strangely revived all his previous suspicions, and set him to thinking. Was the singular sagacity displayed by the orator in his search purely intuitive? Could any one have disclosed to him the secret of the passengers' hoards? Was it possible for *her* while sitting alone in the coach to have communicated with the band? Suddenly the remembrance flashed across him of her opening the window for fresh air! She could have easily then dropped some signal. If this were so, and she really was the culprit, it was quite natural for her own safety that she should encourage the passengers in the absurd suspicion of himself! His dying interest revived; a few moments ago he had half resolved to abandon his quest and turn back at Three Pines. Now he determined to follow her to the end. But he did not indulge in any further sophistry regarding his duty; yet, in a new sense of honor, he did not dream of retaliating upon her by communicating his suspicions to his fellow passengers. When the coach started again, he took his seat on the top, and remained there until they reached Jamestown in the early evening. Here a number of his despoiled companions were obliged to wait, to communicate with their friends. Happily, the exemption that had made them indignant enabled him to continue his journey with a full purse. But he was content with a modest surveillance of the lady from the top of the coach.

On arriving at Stockton this surveillance became less easy. It was the terminus of the stage-route, and the divergence of others by boat and rail. If he were lucky enough to discover which one the lady took, his presence now would be more marked, and might excite her suspicion. But here a circumstance, which he also believed to be providential, determined him. As the luggage was being removed from the top of the coach, he overheard the agent tell the expressman to check the "lady's" trunk to San Luis. Key was seized with an idea which seemed to solve the difficulty, although it involved a risk of losing the clue entirely. There were two routes to San Luis, one was by stage, and direct, though slower; the other by steamboat and rail, via San Francisco. If he took the boat, there was less danger of her discovering him, even if she chose the same conveyance; if she took the direct stage, — and he trusted to a woman's avoidance of the hurry of change and transshipment for that choice, — he would still arrive at San Luis, via San Francisco, an hour before her. He resolved to take the boat; a careful scrutiny from a stateroom window of the arriving passengers on the gang-plank satisfied him that she had preferred the stage. There was still the chance that in losing sight of her she might escape him, but the risk seemed small. And a trifling circumstance had almost unconsciously influenced him — after his romantic and superstitious fashion — as to this final step.

He had been singularly moved when he heard that San Luis was the lady's probable destination. It did not seem to bear any relation to the mountain wilderness and the wild life she had just quitted; it was apparently the most antipathetic, incongruous, and inconsistent refuge she could have taken. It offered no opportunity for the disposal of booty, or for communication with the gang. It was less secure than a crowded town. An old Spanish mission and monastery college in a sleepy pastoral plain, it had even retained its old-world flavor amidst American improvements and social revolution. He knew it well. From the quaint college cloisters, where the only reposeful years of his adventurous youth had been spent, to the long Alameda, or double avenues of ancient trees, which connected it with the Convent of Santa Luisa, and some of his youthful "devotions," — it had been the nursery of his romance. He was amused at what seemed to be the irony of fate, in now linking it with this folly of his maturer manhood; and yet he was uneasily conscious of being more seriously affected by it. And it was with a greater anxiety than this adventure had ever yet cost him that he at last arrived at the San José hotel, and from a balcony corner awaited the coming of the coach. His heart beat rapidly as it approached. She was there! But at her side, as she descended from the coach, was the mysterious horseman of the Sierra road. Key could not mistake the well-built figure, whatever doubt there had been about the features, which had been so carefully concealed. With the astonishment of this rediscovery, there flashed across him again the fatefulness of the inspiration which had decided him not to go in the coach. His presence there would no doubt have warned the stranger, and so estopped this convincing dénouement. It was quite possible that her companion, by relays of horses and the advantage of bridle cut-offs, could have easily followed the Three Pine coach and joined her at Stockton. But for what purpose? The lady's trunk, which had not been disturbed during the first part of the journey, and had been forwarded at Stockton untouched before Key's eyes, could not have contained booty to be disposed of in this forgotten old town.

The register of the hotel bore simply the name of "Mrs. Barker," of Stockton, but no record of her companion, who seemed to have disappeared as mysteriously as he came. That she occupied a sitting-room on the same floor as his own — in which she was apparently secluded during the rest of the day — was all he knew. Nobody else seemed to know her. Key felt an odd hesitation, that might have been the result of some vague fear of implicating her prematurely, in making any marked inquiry, or imperiling his secret by the bribed espionage of servants. Once when he was passing her door he heard the sounds of laughter, — albeit innocent and heart-free, — which seemed so inconsistent with the gravity of the situation and his own thoughts that he was strangely shocked. But he was still more disturbed by a later occurrence. In his watchfulness of the movements of his neighbor he had been equally careful of his own, and had not only refrained from registering his name, but had enjoined secrecy upon the landlord, whom he knew. Yet the next morning after his arrival, the porter not answering his bell promptly enough, he so far forgot himself as to walk to the staircase, which was near the lady's room, and call to the employee over the balustrade. As he was still leaning over the railing, the faint creak of a door, and a singular magnetic consciousness of being overlooked, caused him to turn slowly, but only in time to hear the rustle of a withdrawing skirt as the door was quickly closed. In an instant he felt the full force of his foolish heedlessness, but it was too late. Had the mysterious fugitive recognized him? Perhaps not; their eyes had not met, and his face had been turned away.

He varied his espionage by subterfuges, which his knowledge of the old town made easy. He watched the door of the hotel, himself unseen, from the windows of a billiard saloon opposite, which he had frequented in former days. Yet he was surprised the same afternoon to see her, from his coigne of vantage, reëntering the hotel, where he was sure he had left her a few moments ago. Had she gone out by some other exit, — or had she been disguised? But on entering his room that evening he was confounded by an incident that seemed to him as convincing of her identity as it was audacious. Lying on his pillow were a few dead leaves of an odorous mountain fern, known only to the Sierras. They were tied together by a narrow blue ribbon, and had evidently been intended to attract his attention. As he took them in his hand, the distinguishing subtle aroma of the little sylvan hollow in the hills came to him like a memory and a revelation! He summoned the chambermaid; she knew nothing of them, or indeed of any one who had entered his room. He walked cautiously into the hall; the lady's sitting-room door was open, the room was empty. "The occupant," said the chambermaid, "had left that afternoon." He held the proof of her identity in his hand, but she herself had vanished! That she had recognized him there was now no doubt: had she divined the real object of his quest, or had she accepted it as a mere sentimental gallantry at the moment when she knew it was hopeless, and she herself was perfectly safe from pursuit? In either event he had been duped. He did not know whether to be piqued, angry, — or relieved of his irresolute quest.

Nevertheless, he spent the rest of the twilight and the early evening in fruitlessly wandering through the one long thoroughfare of the town, until it merged into the bosky Alameda, or spacious grove, that connected it with Santa Luisa. By degrees his chagrin and disappointment were forgotten in the memories of the past, evoked by the familiar pathway. The moon was slowly riding overhead, and silvering the carriageway between the straight ebony lines of trees, while the footpaths were diapered with black and white checkers. The faint tinkling of a tram-car bell in the distance apprised him of one of the few innovations of the past. The car was approaching him, overtook him, and was passing, with its faintly illuminated windows, when, glancing carelessly up, he beheld at one of them the profile of the face which he had just thought he had lost forever!

He stopped for an instant, not in indecision this time, but in a grim resolution to let no chance escape him now. The car was going slowly; it was easy to board it now, but again the tinkle of the bell indicated that it was stopping at the corner of a road beyond. He checked his pace, — a lady alighted, — it was she! She turned into the cross-street, darkened with the shadows of some low suburban tenement houses, and he boldly followed. He was fully determined to find out her secret, and even, if necessary, to accost her for that purpose. He was perfectly aware what he was doing, and all its risks and penalties; he knew the audacity of such an introduction, but he felt in his left-hand pocket for the sprig of fern which was an excuse for it; he knew the danger of following a possible confidante of desperadoes, but he felt in his right-hand pocket for the derringer that was equal to it. They were both there; he was ready.

He was nearing the convent and the oldest and most ruinous part of the town. He did not disguise from himself the gloomy significance of this; even in the old days the crumbling adobe buildings that abutted on the old garden wall of the convent were the haunts of lawless Mexicans and vagabond peons. As the roadway began to be rough and uneven, and the gaunt outlines of the sagging roofs of tiles stood out against the sky above the lurking shadows of ruined doorways, he was prepared for the worst. As the crumbling but still massive walls of the convent garden loomed ahead, the tall, graceful, black-gowned figure he was following presently turned into the shadow of the wall itself. He quickened his pace, lest it should again escape him. Suddenly it stopped, and remained motionless. He stopped, too. At the same moment it vanished!

He ran quickly forward to where it had stood, and found himself before a large iron gate, with a smaller one in the centre, that had just clanged to on its rusty hinges. He rubbed his eyes! — the place, the gate, the wall, were all strangely familiar! Then he stepped back into the road way, and looked at it again. He was not mistaken.

He was standing before the porter's lodge of the Convent of the Sacred Heart.

CHAPTER V

THE day following the great stagecoach robbery found the patient proprietor of Collinson's Mill calm and untroubled in his usual seclusion. The news that had thrilled the length and breadth of Galloper's Ridge had not touched the leafy banks of the dried-up river; the hue and cry had followed the stage-road, and no courier had deemed it worth his while to diverge as far as the rocky ridge which formed the only pathway to the mill. That day Collinson's solitude had been unbroken even by the haggard emigrant from the valley, with his old monotonous story of hardship and privation. The birds had flown nearer to the old mill, as if emboldened by the unwonted quiet. That morning there had been the half-human imprint of a bear's foot in the ooze beside the mill-wheel; and coming home with his scant stock from the woodland pasture, he had found a golden squirrel — a beautiful, airy embodiment of the brown woods itself — calmly seated on his bar-counter, with a biscuit between its baby hands. He was full of his characteristic reveries and abstractions that afternoon; falling into them even at his wood-pile, leaning on his axe — so still that an emerald-throated lizard, who had slid upon the log, went to sleep under the forgotten stroke.

But at nightfall the wind arose, — at first as a distant murmur along the hillside, that died away before it reached the rocky ledge; then it rocked the tops of the tall redwoods behind the mill, but left the mill and the dried leaves that lay in the river-bed undisturbed. Then the murmur was prolonged, until it became the continuous trouble of some far-off sea, and at last the wind possessed the ledge itself, driving the smoke down the stumpy chimney of the mill, rattling the sun-warped shingles on the roof, stirring the inside rafters with cool breaths, and singing over the rough projections of the outside eaves. At nine o'clock he rolled himself up in his blankets before the fire, as was his wont, and fell asleep.

It was past midnight when he was awakened by the familiar clatter of boulders down the grade, the usual simulation of a wild rush from without that encompassed the whole mill, even to that heavy impact against the door, which he had heard once before. In this he recognized merely the ordinary phenomena of his experience, and only turned over to sleep again. But this time the door rudely fell in upon him, and a figure strode over his prostrate body, with a gun leveled at his head.

He sprang sideways for his own weapon, which stood by the hearth. In another second that action would have been his last, and the solitude of Seth Collinson might have remained henceforward unbroken by any mortal. But the gun of the first figure was knocked sharply upward by a second man, and the one and only shot fired that night sped harmlessly to the roof. With the report he felt his arms gripped tightly behind him; through the smoke he saw dimly that the room was filled with masked and armed men, and in another moment he was pinioned and thrust into his empty armchair. At a signal three of the men left the room, and he could hear them exploring the other rooms and outhouses. Then the two men who had been standing beside him fell back with a certain disciplined precision, as a smooth-chinned man advanced from the open door. Going to the bar, he poured out a glass of whiskey, tossed it off deliberately, and, standing in front of Collinson, with his shoulder against the chimney and his hand resting lightly on his hip, cleared his throat. Had Collinson been an observant man, he would have noticed that the two men dropped their eyes and moved their feet with a half-impatient, perfunctory air of waiting. Had he witnessed the stage-robbery, he would have recognized in the smooth-faced man the presence of "the orator." But he only gazed at him with his dull, imperturbable patience.

"We regret exceedingly to have to use force to a gentleman, in his own house," began the orator blandly; "but we feel it our duty to prevent a repetition of the unhappy incident which occurred as we entered. We desire that you should answer a few questions, and are deeply grateful that you are still able to do so, — which seemed extremely improbable a moment or two ago." He paused, coughed, and leaned back against the chimney. "How many men have you here besides yourself?"

"Nary one," said Collinson.

The interrogator glanced at the other men, who had re-entered. They nodded significantly.

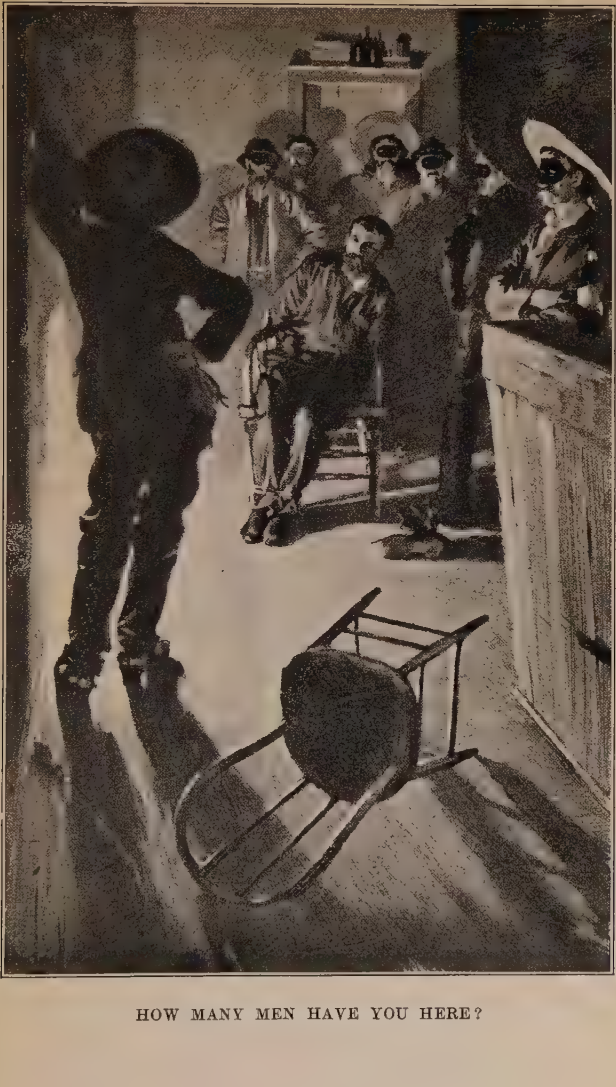
"Good!" he resumed. "You have told the truth — an excellent habit, and one that expedites business. Now, is there a room in this house with a door that locks? Your front door *does n't.*"

"No."

"No cellar nor outhouse?"

"No."

"We regret that; for it will compel us, much against our wishes, to keep you bound as you are for the present. The matter is simply this: circumstances of a very pressing nature oblige us to occupy this house for a few days, — possibly for an indefinite period. We respect the sacred rites of hospitality too much to turn you out of it; indeed, nothing could be more distasteful to our feelings than to have you, in your own person, spread such a disgraceful report through the chivalrous Sierras. We must therefore



HOW MANY MEN HAVE YOU HERE?

keep you a close prisoner, — open, however, to an offer. It is this: we propose to give you five hundred dollars for this property as it stands, provided that you leave it and accompany a pack-train which will start to-morrow morning for the lower valley as far as Thompson's Pass, binding yourself to quit the State for three months and keep this matter a secret. Three of these gentlemen will go with you. They will point out to you your duty; their shot-guns will apprise you of any dereliction from it. What do you say?"

"Who yer talking to?" said Collinson in a dull voice.

"You remind us," said the orator suavely, "that we have not yet the pleasure of knowing."

"My name's Seth Collinson."

There was a dead silence in the room, and every eye was fixed upon the two men. The orator's smile slightly stiffened.

"Where from?" he continued blandly.

"Mizzouri."

"A very good place to go back to, — through Thompson's Pass. But you have n't answered our proposal."

"I reckon I don't intend to sell this house, or leave it," said Collinson simply.

"I trust you will not make us regret the fortunate termination of your little accident, Mr. Collinson," said the orator with a singular smile. "May I ask why you object to selling out? Is it the figure?"

"The house is n't mine," said Collinson deliberately. "I built this yer house for my wife wot I left in Mizzouri. It's hers. I kalkilate to keep it, and live in it ontil she comes fur it! And when I tell ye that she is dead, ye kin reckon just what chance ye have of ever gettin' it."

There was an unmistakable start of sensation in the room, followed by a silence so profound that the moaning of the wind on the mountain-side was distinctly heard. A well-built man, with a mask that scarcely concealed his heavy mustachios, who had been standing with his back to the orator in half-contemptuous patience, faced around suddenly and made a step forward as if to come between the questioner and questioned. A voice from the corner ejaculated, "By G—d!"

"Silence," said the orator sharply. Then still more harshly he turned to the others: "Pick him up, and stand him outside with a guard; and then clear out, all of you!"

The prisoner was lifted up and carried out; the room was instantly cleared; only the orator and the man who had stepped forward remained. Simultaneously they drew the masks from their faces, and stood looking at each other. The orator's face was smooth and corrupt; the full, sensual lips wrinkled at the corners with a sardonic humor; the man who confronted him appeared to be physically and even morally his superior, albeit gloomy and discontented in expression. He cast a rapid glance around the room, to assure himself that they were alone; and then, straightening his eyebrows as he backed against the chimney, said: —

"D—d if I like this, Chivers! It 's your affair; but it 's mighty low-down work for a man!"

"You might have made it easier if you had n't knocked up Bryce's gun. That would have settled it, though no one guessed that the cur was her husband," said Chivers hotly.

"If you want it settled *that way*, there 's still time," returned the other with a slight sneer. "You 've only to tell him that you 're the man that ran away with his wife, and you 'll have it out together, right on the ledge at twelve paces. The boys will see you through. In fact," he added, his sneer deepening, "I rather think it 's what they 're expecting."

"Thank you, Mr. Jack Riggs," said Chivers sardonically. "I dare say it would be more convenient to some people, just before our booty is divided, if I were drilled through by a blundering shot from that hayseed; or it would seem right to your high-toned chivalry if a dead-shot as I am knocked over a man who may have never fired a revolver before; but I don't exactly see it in that light, either as a man or as your equal partner. I don't think you quite understand me, my dear Jack. If you don't value the only man who is identified in all California as the leader of this gang (the man whose style and address has made it popular — yes, *popular*, by G—d! — to every man, woman, and child who has heard of him; whose sayings and doings are quoted by the newspapers; whom people run risks to see; who has got the sympathy of the crowd, so that judges hesitate to issue warrants and constables to serve them), — if *you* don't see the use of such a man, *I* do. Why, there 's a column and a half in the 'Sacramento Union' about our last job, calling me the 'Claude Duval' of the Sierras, and speaking of my courtesy to a lady! A *lady!* — *his* wife, by G—d! *our* confederate! My dear Jack, you not only don't know business values, but, 'pon my soul, you don't seem to understand humor! Ha, ha!"

For all his cynical levity, for all his affected exaggeration, there was the ring of an unmistakable and even pitiable vanity in his voice, and a self-consciousness that suffused his broad cheeks and writhed his full mouth, but seemed to deepen the frown on Riggs's face.

"You know the woman hates it, and would bolt if she could, — even from you," said Riggs gloomily. "Think what she might do if she knew her husband were here. I tell you she holds our lives in the hollow of her hand."

"That 's your fault, Mr. Jack Riggs; you would bring your sister with her infernal convent innocence and simplicity into our hut in the hollow. She was meek enough before that. But this is sheer nonsense. I have no fear of her. The woman don't live who would go back on

Godfrey Chivers — for a husband! Besides, she went off to see your sister at the Convent of Santa Luisa as soon as she passed those bonds off on Charley to get rid of! Think of her traveling with that d—d fool lawyer all the way to Stockton, and his bonds (which we had put back in her bag) alongside of them all the time, and he telling her he was going to stop their payment, and giving her the letter to mail for him! — eh? Well, we 'll have time to get rid of her husband before she gets back. If he don't go easy — well" —

"None of that, Chivers, you understand, once for all!" interrupted Riggs peremptorily. "If you cannot see that your making away with that woman's husband would damn that boasted reputation you make so much of and set every man's hand against us, *I* do, and I won't permit it. It 's a rotten business enough, — our coming on him as we have; and if this was n't the only God-forsaken place where we could divide our stuff without danger and get it away off the highroads, I 'd pull up stakes at once."

"Let her stay at the convent, then, and be d—d to her," said Chivers roughly. "She 'll be glad enough to be with your sister again; and there 's no fear of her being touched there."

"But I want to put an end to that, too," returned Riggs sharply. "I do not choose to have my sister any longer implicated with *our* confederate or *your* mistress. No more of that — you understand me?"

The two men had been standing side by side, leaning against the chimney. Chivers now faced his companion, his full lips wreathed into an evil smile.

"I think I understand you, Mr. Jack Riggs, or — I beg your pardon — Rivers, or whatever your real name may be," he began slowly. "Sadie Collinson, the mistress of Judge Godfrey Chivers, formerly of Kentucky, was good enough company for you the day you dropped down upon us in our little house in the hollow of Galloper's Ridge. We were living quite an idyllic, pastoral life there, were n't we? — she and me; hidden from the censorious eye of society and — Collinson, obeying only the voice of Nature and the little birds. It was a happy time," he went on with a grimly affected sigh, disregarding his companion's impatient gesture. "You were young then, waging *your* fight against society, and fresh — uncommonly fresh, I may say — from your first exploit. And a very stupid, clumsy, awkward exploit, too, Mr. Riggs, if you will pardon my freedom. You wanted money, and you had an ugly temper, and you had lost both to a gambler; so you stopped the coach to rob him, and had to kill two men to get back your paltry thousand dollars, after frightening a whole coach-load of passengers, and letting Wells, Fargo & Co.'s treasure-box with fifty thousand dollars in it slide. It was a stupid, a blundering, a *cruel* act, Mr. Riggs, and I think I told you so at the time. It was a waste of energy and material, and made you, not a hero, but a stupid outcast! I think I proved this to you, and showed you how it might have been done."

"Dry up on that," interrupted Riggs impatiently. "You offered to become my partner, and you did."

"Pardon me. Observe, my impetuous friend, that my contention is that you — *you* — poisoned our blameless Eden in the hollow; that *you* were our serpent, and that this Sadie Collinson, over whom you have become so fastidious, whom you knew as my mistress, was obliged to become our confederate. You did not object to her when we formed our gang, and her house became our hiding-place and refuge. You took advantage of her woman's wit and fine address in disposing of our booty; you availed yourself, with the rest, of the secrets she gathered as *my* mistress, just as you were willing to profit by the superior address of her paramour — your humble servant — when your own face was known to the sheriff, and your old methods pronounced brutal and vulgar. Excuse me, but I must insist upon *this*, and that you dropped down upon me and Sadie Collinson exactly as you have dropped down here upon her husband."

"Enough of this!" said Riggs angrily. "I admit the woman is part and parcel of the gang, and gets her share, — or you get it for her," he added sneeringly; "but that does n't permit her to mix herself with my family affairs."

"Pardon me again," interrupted Chivers softly. "Your memory, my dear Riggs, is absurdly defective. We knew that you had a young sister in the mountains, from whom you discreetly wished to conceal your real position. We respected, and I trust shall always respect, your noble reticence. But do you remember the night you were taking her to school at Santa Luisa, — two nights before the fire, — when you were recognized on the road near Skinner's, and had to fly with her for your life, and brought her to us, — your two dear old friends, 'Mr. and Mrs. Barker of Chicago,' who had a pastoral home in the forest? You remember how we took her in, — yes, doubly took her in, — and kept your secret from her? And do you remember how this woman (this mistress of *mine* and *our* confederate), while we were away, saved her from the fire on our only horse, caught the stagecoach, and brought her to the convent?"

Riggs walked towards the window, turned, and coming back, held out his hand. "Yes, she did it; and I thanked her, as I thank you." He stopped and hesitated, as the other took his hand. "But, blank it all, Chivers, don't you see that Alice is a young girl, and this woman is — you know what I mean. Somebody might recognize *her*, and that would be worse for Alice than even if it were known what Alice's *brother* was. G—d! if these two things were put together, the girl would be ruined forever."

"Jack," said Chivers suddenly, "you want this woman out of the way. Well — dash it all! — she nearly separated us, and I 'll be frank with you as between man and man. I 'll give her up! There are women enough in the world, and hang it, we 're partners after all!"

"Then you 'll abandon her?" said Riggs slowly, his eyes fixed on his companion.

"Yes. She 's getting a little too maundering lately. It will be a ticklish job to manage, for she knows too much; but it will be done. There 's my hand on it."

Riggs not only took no notice of the proffered hand, but his former look of discontent came back with an ill-concealed addition of loathing and contempt.

"We 'll drop that now," he said shortly; "we 've talked here alone long enough already. The men are waiting for us." He turned on his heel into the inner room. Chivers remained standing by the chimney until his stiffened smile gave way under the working of his writhing lips; then he turned to the bar, poured out and swallowed another glass of whiskey at a single gulp, and followed his partner with half-closed lids that scarcely veiled his ominous eyes.

The men, with the exception of the sentinels stationed on the rocky ledge and the one who was guarding the unfortunate Collinson, were drinking and gambling away their prospective gains around a small pile of portmanteaus and saddle-bags, heaped in the centre of the room. They contained the results of their last successes, but one pair of saddle-bags bore the mildewed appearance of having been cached, or buried, some time before. Most of their treasure was in packages of gold-dust; and from the conversation that ensued, it appeared that, owing to the difficulties of disposing of it in the mountain towns, the plan was to convey it by ordinary pack-mule to the unfrequented valley, and thence by an emigrant wagon, on the old emigrant trail, to the southern counties, where it could be no longer traced. Since the recent robberies, the local express companies and bankers had refused to receive it, except the owners were known and identified. There had been but one box of coin, which had already been speedily divided up among the band. Drafts, bills, bonds, and valuable papers had been usually intrusted to one "Charley," who acted as a flying messenger to a corrupt broker in Sacramento, who played the rôle of the band's "fence."

It had been the duty of Chivers to control this delicate business, even as it had been his peculiar function to open all the letters and documents. This he had always lightened by characteristic levity and sarcastic comments on the private revelations of the contents. The rough, ill-spelt letter of the miner to his wife, inclosing a draft, or the more sentimental effusion of an emigrant swain to his sweetheart, with the gift of a "specimen," had always received due attention at the hands of this elegant humorist. But the operation was conducted to-night with business severity and silence. The two leaders sat opposite to each other, in what might have appeared to the rest of the band a scarcely veiled surveillance of each other's actions. When the examination was concluded, and the more valuable inclosures put aside, the despoiled letters were carried to the fire and heaped upon the coals. Presently the chimney added its roar to the moaning of the distant hillside, a few sparks leaped up and died out in the midnight air, as if the pathos and sentiment of the unconscious correspondents had exhaled with them.

"That 's a d—d foolish thing to do," growled French Pete over his cards.

"Why ?" demanded Chivers sharply.

"Why ? — why, it makes a flare in the sky that any scout can see, and a scent for him to follow."

"We 're four miles from any traveled road," returned Chivers contemptuously, "and the man who could see that glare and smell that smoke would be on his way here already."

"That reminds me that that chap you 've tied up — that Collinson — allows he wants to see you," continued French Pete.

"To see *me!*" repeated Chivers. "You mean the captain?"

"I reckon he means *you*," returned French Pete; "he said the man who talked so purty."

The men looked at each other with a smile of anticipation, and put down their cards. Chivers walked towards the door; one or two rose to their feet as if to follow, but Riggs stopped them peremptorily. "Sit down," he said roughly; then, as Chivers passed him, he added to him in a lower tone, "Remember."

Slightly squaring his shoulders and opening his coat, to permit a rhetorical freedom, which did not, however, prevent him from keeping touch with the butt of his revolver, Chivers stepped into the open air. Collinson had been moved to the shelter of an overhang of the roof, probably more for the comfort of the guard, who sat cross-legged on the ground near him, than for his own. Dismissing the man with a gesture, Chivers straightened himself before his captive.

"We deeply regret that your unfortunate determination, my dear sir, has been the means of depriving *us* of the pleasure of your company, and *you* of your absolute freedom; but may we cherish the hope that your desire to see me may indicate some change in your opinion?"

By the light of the sentry's lantern left upon the ground, Chivers could see that Collinson's face wore a slightly troubled and even apologetic expression.

"I 've bin thinkin'," said Collinson, raising his eyes to his captor with a singularly new and shy admiration in them, "mebbee not so much of *wot* you said, ez *how* you said it, and it 's kinder bothered me, sittin' here, that I ain't bin actin' to you boys quite on the square. I 've said to myself, 'Collinson, thar ain't another house betwixt Bald Top and Skinner's whar them fellows kin get a bite or a drink to help themselves, and you ain't offered 'em neither. It ain't no matter who they are or how they came; whether they came crawling along the road from the valley, or dropped down upon you like them rocks from the grade; yere they are, and it 's your duty, ez long ez you keep this yer house for your wife in trust, so to speak, for wanderers.' And I ain't forgettin' yer ginerel soft style and easy gait with me when you kem here. It ain't every man as could walk into another man's house arter the owner of it had grabbed a gun, ez soft-speakin', ez overlookin', and ez perlite ez you. I 've acted mighty rough and low-down, and I know it. And I sent for you to say that you and your folks kin use this house and all that 's in it ez long ez you 're in trouble. I 've told you why I could n't sell the house to ye, and why I could n't leave it. But ye kin use it, and while ye 're here, and when you go, Collinson don't tell nobody. I don't know what ye mean by 'binding myself' to keep your secret; when Collinson says a thing he sticks to it, and when he passes his word with a man, or a man passes his word with him, it don't need no bit of paper."

There was no doubt of its truth. In the grave, upraised eyes of his prisoner, Chivers saw the certainty that he could trust him, even far more than he could trust any one within the house he had just quitted. But this very certainty, for all its assurance of safety to himself, filled him, not with remorse, which might have been an evanescent emotion, but with a sudden alarming and terrible consciousness of being in the presence of a hitherto unknown and immeasurable power! He had no pity for the man who trusted him; he had no sense of shame in taking advantage of it; he even felt an intellectual superiority in this want of sagacity in his dupe; but he still felt in some way defeated, insulted, shocked, and frightened. At first, like all scoundrels, he had measured the man by himself; was suspicious and prepared for rivalry; but the grave truthfulness of Collinson's eyes left him helpless. He was terrified by this unknown factor. The right that contends and fights often stimulates its adversary; the right that yields leaves the victor vanquished. Chivers could even have killed Collinson in his vague discomfiture, but he had a terrible consciousness that there was something behind him that he could not make way with. That was why this accomplished rascal felt his flaccid cheeks grow purple and his glib tongue trip before his captive.

But Collinson, more occupied with his own shortcomings, took no note of this, and Chivers quickly recovered his wits, if not his former artificiality. "All right," he said quickly, with a hurried glance at the door behind him. "Now that you think better of it, I'll be frank with you, and tell you I'm your friend. You understand, — your friend. Don't talk much to those men — don't give yourself away to them;" he laughed this time in absolute natural embarrassment. "Don't talk about your wife, and this house, but just say you've made the thing up with me, — with *me*, you know, and I'll see you through." An idea, as yet vague, that he could turn Collinson's unexpected docility to his own purposes, possessed him even in his embarrassment, and he was still more strangely conscious of his inordinate vanity gathering a fearful joy from Collinson's evident admiration. It was heightened by his captive's next words.

"Ef I wasn't tied I'd shake hands with ye on that. You're the kind o' man, Mr. Chivers, that I cottoned to from the first. Ef this house wasn't *hers*, I'd 'a' bin tempted to cotton to yer offer, too, and mebbee made yer one myself, for it seems to me your style and mine would sorter jibe together. But I see you sabe what's in my mind, and make allowance. *We* don't want no bit o' paper to shake hands on that. Your secret and your folk's secret is mine, and I don't blab that any more than I'd blab to them wot you 've just told me."

Under a sudden impulse, Chivers leaned forward, and, albeit with somewhat unsteady hands and an embarrassed will, untied the cords that held Collinson in his chair. As the freed man stretched himself to his full height, he looked gravely down into the bleared eyes of his captor, and held out his strong right hand. Chivers took it. Whether there was some occult power in Collinson's honest grasp, I know not; but there sprang up in Chivers's agile mind the idea that a good way to get rid of Mrs. Collinson was to put her in the way of her husband's finding her, and for an instant, in the contemplation of that idea, this supreme rascal absolutely felt an embarrassing glow of virtue.

CHAPTER VI

THE astonishment of Preble Key on recognizing the gateway into which the mysterious lady had vanished was so great that he was at first inclined to believe her entry *there* a mere trick of his fancy. That the confederate of a gang of robbers should be admitted to the austere recesses of the convent, with a celerity that bespoke familiarity, was incredible. He again glanced up and down the length of the shadowed but still visible wall. There was no one there. The wall itself contained no break or recess in which one could hide, and this was the only gateway. The opposite side of the street in the full moonlight stared emptily. No! Unless she were an illusion herself and his whole chase a dream, she *must* have entered here.

But the chase was not hopeless. He had at least tracked her to a place where she could be identified. It was not a hotel, which she could leave at any moment unobserved. Though he could not follow her and penetrate its seclusion now, he could later — thanks to his old associations with the padres of the contiguous college — gain an introduction to the Lady Superior on some pretext. She was safe there that night. He turned away with a feeling of relief. The incongruity of her retreat assumed a more favorable aspect to his hopes. He looked at the hallowed walls and the slumbering peacefulness of the gnarled old trees that hid the convent, and a gentle reminiscence of his youth stole over him. It was not the first time that he had gazed wistfully upon that chaste refuge where, perhaps, the bright eyes that he had followed in the quaint school procession under the leafy Alameda in the afternoon, were at last closed in gentle slumber. There was the very grille through which the wicked Conchita — or, was it Dolores? — had shot her Parthian glance at the lingering student. And the man of thirty-five, prematurely gray and settled in fortune, smiled as he turned away, and forgot the adventuress of thirty who had brought him there.

The next morning he was up betimes and at the college of San José. Father Cipriano, a trifle more snuffy and aged, remembered with delight his old pupil. Ah! it was true, then, that he had become a mining president, and that was why his hair was gray; but he trusted that Don Preble had not forgot that this was not all of life, and that fortune brought great responsibilities and cares. But what was this, then? He *had* thought of bringing out some of his relations from the States, and placing a niece in the convent. That was good and wise. Ah, yes. For education in this new country, one must turn to the church. And he would see the Lady Superior? Ah! that was but the twist of one's finger and the lifting of a latch to a grave superintendent and a gray head like that. Of course, he had not forgotten the convent and the young señoritas, nor the discipline and the suspended holidays. Ah! it was a special grace of our Lady that he, Father Cipriano, had not been worried into his grave by those foolish muchachos. Yet, when he had extinguished a snuffy chuckle in his red bandana handkerchief, Key knew that he would accompany him to the convent that noon.

It was with a slight stirring of shame over his elaborate pretext that he passed the gate of the Sacred Heart with the good father. But it is to be feared that he speedily forgot that in the unexpected information that it elicited. The Lady Superior was gracious, and even enthusiastic. Ah, yes, it was a growing custom of the American caballeros — who had no homes, nor yet time to create any, — to bring their sisters, wards, and nieces here, and — with a dove-like side-glance towards Key — even the young señoritas they wished to fit for their Christian brides! Unlike the caballero, there were many business men so immersed in their affairs that they could not find time for a personal examination of the convent, — which was to be regretted, — but who, trusting to the reputation of the Sacred Heart and its good friends, simply sent the young lady there by some trusted female companion. Notably this was the case of the Señor Rivers, — did Don Preble ever know him? — a great capitalist in the Sierras, whose sweet young sister, a naïve, ingenuous creature, was the pride of the convent. Of course, it was better that it was so. Discipline and seclusion had to be maintained. The young girl should look upon this as her home. The rules for visitors were necessarily severe. It was rare indeed — except in a case of urgency, such as happened last night — that even a lady, unless the parent of a scholar, was admitted to the hospitality of the convent. And this lady was only the friend of that same sister of the American capitalist, although she was the one who had brought her there. No, she was not a relation. Perhaps Don Preble had heard of a Mrs. Barker, — the friend of Rivers of the Sierras. It was a queer combination of names. But what will you? The names of Americanos mean nothing. And Don Preble knows them not. Ah! possibly? — good! The lady would be remembered, being tall, dark, and of fine presence, though sad. A few hours earlier and Don Preble could have judged for himself, for, as it were, she might have passed through this visitors' room. But she was gone — departed by the coach. It was from a telegram — those heathen contrivances that blurt out things to you, with never an excuse, nor a smile, nor a kiss of the hand! For her part, she never let her scholars receive them, but opened them herself, and translated them in a Christian spirit, after due preparation, at her leisure.

And it was this telegram that made the Señora Barker go, or, without doubt, she would have of herself told to the Don Preble, her compatriot of the Sierras, how good the convent was for his niece.

Stung by the thought that this woman had again evaded him, and disconcerted and confused by the scarcely intelligible information he had acquired, Key could with difficulty maintain his composure. "The caballero is tired of his long pasear," said the Lady Superior gently. "We will have a glass of wine in the lodge waiting-room." She led the way from the reception room to the outer door, but stopped at the sound of approaching footsteps and rustling muslin along the gravel-walk. "The second class are going out," she said, as a gentle procession of white frocks, led by two nuns, filed before the gateway. "We will wait until they have passed. But the señor can see that my children do not look unhappy."

They certainly looked very cheerful, although they had halted before the gateway with a little of the demureness of young people who know they are overlooked by authority, and had bumped against each other with affected gravity. Somewhat ashamed of his useless deception, and the guileless simplicity of the good Lady Superior, Key hesitated and began: "I am afraid that I am really giving you too much trouble," and suddenly stopped.

For as his voice broke the demure silence, one of the nearest — a young girl of apparently seventeen — turned towards him with a quick and an apparently irresistible impulse, and as quickly turned away again. But in that instant Key caught a glimpse of a face that might not only have thrilled him in its beauty, its freshness, but in some vague suggestiveness. Yet it was not that which set his pulses beating; it was the look of joyous recognition set in the parted lips and sparkling eyes, the glow of childlike innocent pleasure that mantled the sweet young face, the frank confusion of suddenly realized expectancy and longing. A great truth gripped his throbbing heart, and held it still. It was the face that he had seen in the hollow!

The movement of the young girl was too marked to escape the eye of the Lady Superior, though she had translated it differently. "You must not believe our young ladies are all so rude, Don Preble," she said dryly; "though our dear child has still some of the mountain freedom. And this is the Señor Rivers's sister. But possibly — who knows?" she said gently, yet with a sudden sharpness in her clear eyes, — "perhaps she recognized in your voice a companion of her brother."

Luckily for Key, the shock had been so sudden and overpowering that he showed none of the lesser symptoms of agitation or embarrassment. In this revelation of a secret, that he now instinctively felt was bound up with his own future happiness, he exhibited none of the signs of a discovered intriguer or unmasked Lothario. He said quietly and coldly: "I am afraid I have not the pleasure of knowing the young lady, and certainly have never before addressed her." Yet he scarcely heard his companion's voice, and answered mechanically, seeing only before him the vision of the girl's bewitching face, in its still more bewitching consciousness of his presence. With all that he now knew, or thought he knew, came a strange delicacy of asking further questions, a vague fear of compromising *her*, a quick impatience of his present deception; even his whole quest of her seemed now to be a profanation, for which he must ask her forgiveness. He longed to be alone to recover himself. Even the temptation to linger on some pretext, and wait for her return and another glance from her joyous eyes, was not as strong as his conviction of the necessity of cooler thought and action. He had met his fate that morning, for good or ill; that was all he knew. As soon as he could decently retire, he thanked the Lady Superior, promised to communicate with her later, and taking leave of Father Cipriano, found himself again in the street.

Who was she, what was she, and what meant her joyous recognition of him? It is to be feared that it was the last question that affected him most, now that he felt that he must have really loved her from the first. Had she really seen him before, and had been as mysteriously impressed as he was? It was not the reflection of a conceited man, for Key had not that kind of vanity, and he had already touched the humility that is at the base of any genuine passion. But he would not think of that now. He had established the identity of the other woman, as being her companion in the house in the hollow on that eventful night; but it was *her* profile that he had seen at the window. The mysterious brother Rivers might have been one of the robbers, — perhaps the one who accompanied Mrs. Barker to San José. But it was plain that the young girl had no complicity with the actions of the gang, whatever might have been her companion's confederation. In the prescience of a true lover, he knew that she must have been deceived and kept in utter ignorance of it. There was no look of it in her lovely, guileless eyes; her very impulsiveness and ingenuousness would have long since betrayed the secret. Was it left for him, at this very outset of his passion, to be the one to tell her? Could he bear to see those frank, beautiful eyes dimmed with shame and sorrow? His own grew moist. Another idea began to haunt him. Would it not be wiser, even more manly, for him — a man over twice her years — to leave her alone with her secret, and so pass out of her innocent young life as chancefully as he had entered it? But was it altogether chanceful? Was there not in her innocent happiness in him a recognition of something in him better than he had dared to think himself? It was the last conceit of the humility of love.

He reached his hotel at last, unresolved, perplexed, yet singularly happy. The clerk handed him, in passing, a business-looking letter, formally addressed. Without opening it, he took it to his room, and throwing himself listlessly on a chair by the window again tried to think. But the atmosphere of his room only recalled to him the mysterious gift he had found the day before on his pillow. He felt now with a thrill that it must have been from *her*. How did she convey it there? She would not have intrusted it to Mrs. Barker. The idea struck him now as distastefully as it seemed improbable. Perhaps she had been here herself with her companion — the convent sometimes made that concession to a relative or well-known friend. He recalled the fact that he had seen Mrs. Barker enter the hotel alone, after the incident of the opening door, while he was leaning over the balustrade. It was *she* who was alone *then*, and had recognized his voice; and he had not known it. She was out again to-day with the procession. A sudden idea struck him. He glanced quickly at the letter in his hand, and hurriedly opened it. It contained only three lines, in a large formal hand, but they sent the swift blood to his cheeks.

"I heard your voice to-day for the third time. I want to hear it again. I will come at dusk. Do not go out until then."

He sat stupefied. Was it madness, audacity, or a trick? He summoned the waiter. The letter had been left by a boy from the confectioner's shop in the next block. He remembered it of old, — a resort for the young ladies of the convent. Nothing was easier than conveying a letter in that way. He remembered with a shock of disillusion and disgust that it was a common device of silly but innocent assignation. Was he to be the ridiculous accomplice of a schoolgirl's extravagant escapade, or the deluded victim of some infamous plot of her infamous companion? He could not believe either; yet he could not check a certain revulsion of feeling towards her, which only a moment ago he would have believed impossible.

Yet whatever was her purpose, he must prevent he coming there at any hazard. Her visit would be the culmination of her folly, or the success of any plot. Even while he was fully conscious of the material effect of any scandal and exposure to her, even while he was incensed and disillusionized at her unexpected audacity, he was unusually stirred with the conviction that she was wronging herself, and that more than ever she demanded his help and his consideration. Still she must not come. But how was he to prevent her? It wanted but an hour of dusk. Even if he could again penetrate the convent on some pretext at that inaccessible hour for visitors, — twilight, — how could he communicate with her? He might intercept her on the way, and persuade her to return; but she must be kept from entering the hotel.

He seized his hat and rushed downstairs. But here another difficulty beset him. It was easy enough to take the ordinary road to the convent, but would *she* follow that public one in what must be a surreptitious escape? And might she not have eluded the procession that morning, and even now be concealed somewhere, waiting for the darkness to make her visit. He concluded to patrol the block next to the hotel, yet near enough to intercept her before she reached it, until the hour came. The time passed slowly. He loitered before shop windows, or entered and made purchases, with his eye on the street. The figure of a pretty girl, — and there were many, — the fluttering ribbons on a distant hat, or the flashing of a cambric skirt around the corner sent a nervous thrill through him. The reflection of his grave, abstracted face against a shop window, or the anouncement of the workings of his own mine on a bulletin board, in its incongruity with his present occupation, gave him an hysterical impulse to laugh. The shadows were already gathering, when he saw a slender, graceful figure disappear in the confectioner's shop on the block below. In his elaborate precautions, he had overlooked that common trysting-spot. He hurried thither, and entered. The object of his search was not there, and he was compelled to make a shamefaced, awkward survey of the tables in an inner refreshment saloon to satisfy himself. Any one of the pretty girls seated there might have been the one who had just entered, but none was the one he sought. He hurried into the street again, — he had wasted a precious moment, — and resumed his watch. The sun had sunk, the Angelus had rung out of a chapel belfry, and shadows were darkening the vista of the Alameda. She had not come. Perhaps she had thought better of it; perhaps she had been prevented; perhaps the whole appointment had been only a trick of some day-scholars, who were laughing at him behind some window. In proportion as he became convinced that she was not coming, he was conscious of a keen despair growing in his heart, and a sickening remorse that he had ever thought of preventing her. And when he at last reluctantly reëntered the hotel, he was as miserable over the conviction that she was not coming as he had been at her expected arrival. The porter met him hurriedly in the hall.

"Sister Seraphina of the Sacred Heart has been here, in a hurry to see you on a matter of importance," he said, eyeing Key somewhat curiously. "She would not wait in the public parlor, as she said her business was confidential, so I have put her in a private sitting-room on your floor."

Key felt the blood leave his cheeks. The secret was out for all his precaution. The Lady Superior had discovered the girl's flight, — or her attempt. One of the governing sisterhood was here to arraign him for it, or at least prevent an open scandal. Yet he was resolved; and seizing this last straw, he hurriedly mounted the stairs, determined to do battle at any risk for the girl's safety, and to injure himself to any extent.

She was standing in the room by the window. The light fell upon the coarse serge dress with its white facings, on the single girdle that scarcely defined the formless waist, on the huge crucifix that dangled ungracefully almost to her knees, on the hideous, white-winged coif that, with the coarse but dense white veil, was itself a renunciation of all human vanity. It was a figure he remembered well as a boy, and even in his excitement and half resentment touched him now, as when a boy, with a sense of its pathetic isolation. His head bowed with boyish deference as she approached gently, passed him a slight salutation, and closed the door that he had forgotten to shut behind him.

Then with a rapid movement, so quick that he could scarcely follow it, the coif, veil, rosary, and crucifix were swept off, and the young pupil of the convent stood before him.

For all the sombre suggestiveness of her disguise and its ungraceful contour, there was no mistaking the adorable little head, tumbled all over with silky tendrils of hair from the hasty withdrawal of her coif, or the blue eyes that sparkled with frank delight beneath them. Key thought her more beautiful than ever. Yet the very effect of her frankness and beauty was to recall him to all the danger and incongruity of her position.

"This is madness," he said quickly. "You may be followed here and discovered in this costume at any moment!" Nevertheless, he caught the two little hands that had been extended to him, and held them tightly, and with a frank familiarity that he would have wondered at an instant before.

"But I won't," she said simply. "You see I 'm doing a ‘half-retreat;’ and I stay with Sister Seraphina in her room; and she always sleeps two hours after the Angelus; and I got out without anybody knowing me, in her clothes. I see what it is,” she said, suddenly bending a reproachful glance upon him, “you don’t like me in them. I know they ’re just horrid; but it was the only way I could get out.”

“You don’t understand me,” he said eagerly. “I don’t like you to run these dreadful risks and dangers for” — he would have said “for me,” but added with sudden humility — “for nothing. Had I dreamed that you cared to see me, I would have arranged it easily without this indiscretion, which might make others misjudge you. Every instant that you remain here — worse, every moment that you are away from the convent in that disguise, is fraught with danger. I know you never thought of it.”

“But I did,” she said quietly; “I thought of it, and thought that if Sister Seraphina woke up, and they sent for me, you would take me away with you to that dear little hollow in the hills, where I first heard your voice. You remember it, don’t you? You were lost, I think, in the darkness, and I used to say to myself afterwards that *I* found you. That was the first time. Then the second time I heard you, was here in the hall. I was alone in the other room, for Mrs. Barker had gone out. I did not know you were here, but I knew your voice. And the third time was before the convent gate, and then I knew you knew me. And after that I did n’t think of anything but coming to you; for I knew that if I was found out, you would take me back with you, and perhaps send word to my brother where we were, and then” — She stopped suddenly, with her eyes fixed on Key’s blank face. Her own grew blank, the joy faded out of her clear eyes, she gently withdrew her hand from his and without a word began to resume her disguise.

"Listen to me," said Key passionately. "I am thinking only of *you*. I want to, and *will*, save you from any blame, — blame you do not understand even now. There is still time. I will go back to the convent with you at once. You shall tell me everything; I will tell you everything on the way."

She had already completely resumed her austere garb, and drew the veil across her face. With the putting on of her coif she seeemed to have extinguished all the joyous youthfulness of her spirit, and moved with the deliberateness of renunciation toward the door. They descended the staircase without a word. Those who saw them pass made way for them with formal respect.

When they were in the street, she said quietly, "Don't give. me your arm — Sisters don't take it." When they had reached the street corner, she turned it, saying, "This is the shortest way."

It was Key who was now restrained, awkward, and embarrassed. The fire of his spirit, the passion he had felt a moment before, had gone out of him, as if she were really the character she had assumed. He said at last desperately: —

"How long did you live in the hollow?"

"Only two days. My brother was bringing me here to school, but in the stagecoach there was some one with whom he had quarreled, and he did n't want to meet him with me. So we got out at Skinner's, and came to the hollow, where his old friends, Mr. and Mrs. Barker, lived."

There was no hesitation nor affectation in her voice. Again he felt that he would as soon have doubted the words of the Sister she represented as her own.

"And your brother — did you live with him?"

"No. I was at school at Marysville until he took me away. I saw little of him for the past two years, for he had business in the mountains — very rough business, where he could n't take me, for it kept him away from the settlements for weeks. I think it had something to do with cattle, for he was always having a new horse. I was all alone before that, too; I had no other relations; I had no friends. We had always been moving about so much, my brother and I. I never saw any one that I liked, except you, and until yesterday I had only *heard* you."

Her perfect naïveté alternately thrilled him with pain and doubt. In his awkwardness and uneasiness he was brutal.

"Yes, but you must have met somebody — other men — here even, when you were out with your schoolfellows, or perhaps on an adventure like this."

Her white coif turned towards him quickly. "I never wanted to know anybody else. I never cared to see anybody else. I never would have gone out in this way but for you," she said hurriedly. After a pause she added in a frightened tone: "That did n't sound like your voice then. It did n't sound like it a moment ago either."

"But you are sure that you know my voice," he said, with affected gayety. "There were two others in the hollow with me that night."

"I know that, too. But I know even what you said. You reproved them for throwing a lighted match in the dry grass. You were thinking of *us* then. I know it."

"Of *us?*" said Key quickly.

"Of Mrs. Barker and myself. We were alone in the house, for my brother and her husband were both away. What you said seemed to forewarn me, and I told her. So we were prepared when the fire came nearer, and we both escaped on the same horse."

"And you dropped your shoes in your flight," said Key laughingly, "and I picked them up the next day, when I came to search for you. I have kept them still."

"They were *her* shoes," said the girl quickly. "I could n't find mine in our hurry, and hers were too large for me, and dropped off." She stopped, and with a faint return of her old gladness said, "Then you *did* come back? I *knew* you would."

"I should have stayed *then*, but we got no reply when we shouted. Why was that?" he demanded suddenly.

"Oh, we were warned against speaking to any stranger, or even being seen by any one while we were alone," returned the girl simply.

"But why?" persisted Key.

"Oh, because there were so many highwaymen and horse-stealers in the woods. Why, they had stopped the coach only a few weeks before, and only a day or two ago, when Mrs. Barker came down. *She* saw them!"

Key with difficulty suppressed a groan. They walked on in silence for some moments, he scarcely daring to lift his eyes to the decorous little figure hastening by his side. Alternately touched by mistrust and pain, at last an infinite pity, not unmingled with a desperate resolution, took possession of him.

"I must make a confession to you, Miss Rivers," he began with the bashful haste of a very boy, "that is" — he stammered with a half-hysteric laugh, — "that is — a confession as if you were really a Sister or a priest, you know — a sort of confidence to you — to your dress. I *have* seen you, or *thought* I saw you before. It was that which brought me here, that which made me follow Mrs. Barker — my only clue to you — to the door of that convent. That night, in the hollow, I saw a profile at the lighted window, which I thought was yours."

"*I* never was near the window," said the young girl quickly. "It must have been Mrs. Barker."

"I know that now," returned Key. "But remember, it was my only clue to you. I mean," he added awkwardly, "it was the means of my finding you."

"I don't see how it made you think of me, whom you never saw, to see another woman's profile," she retorted, with the faintest touch of asperity in her childlike voice. "But," she added, more gently and with a relapse into her adorable naïveté, "most people's profiles look alike."

"It was not that," protested Key, still awkwardly, "it was only that I realized something — only a dream, perhaps."

She did not reply, and they continued on in silence. The gray wall of the convent was already in sight. Key felt he had achieved nothing. Except for information that was hopeless, he had come to no nearer understanding of the beautiful girl beside him, and his future appeared as vague as before; and, above all, he was conscious of an inferiority of character and purpose to this simple creature, who had obeyed him so submissively. Had he acted wisely? Would it not have been better if he had followed her own frankness, and —

"Then it was Mrs. Barker's profile that brought you here?" resumed the voice beneath the coif. "You know she has gone back. I suppose you will follow?"

"You will not understand me," said Key desperately. "But," he added in a lower voice, "I shall remain here until you do."

He drew a little closer to her side.

"Then you must not begin by walking so close to me," she said, moving slightly away; "they may see you from the gate. And you must not go with me beyond that corner. If I have been missed already they will suspect you."

"But how shall I know?" he said, attempting to take her hand. "Let me walk past the gate. I cannot leave you in this uncertainty."

"You will know soon enough," she said gravely, evading his hand. "You must not go further now. Good-night."

She had stopped at the corner of the wall. He again held out his hand. Her little fingers slid coldly between his.

"Good-night, Miss Rivers."

"Stop!" she said suddenly, withdrawing her veil and lifting her clear eyes to his in the moonlight. "You must not say *that* — it is n't the truth. I can't bear to hear it from *your* lips, in *your* voice. My name is *not* Rivers!"

"Not Rivers — why?" said Key astounded.

"Oh, I don't know why," she said half despairingly; "only my brother did n't want me to use my name and his here, and I promised. My name is 'Riggs' — there! It 's a secret — you must n't tell it; but I could not bear to hear *you* say a lie."

"Good-night, Miss Riggs," said Key sadly.

"No, nor that either," she said softly. "Say Alice."

"Good-night, Alice."

She moved on before him. She reached the gate. For a moment her figure, in its austere, formless garments, seemed to him to even stoop and bend forward in the humility of age and self-renunciation, and she vanished within as into a living tomb.

Forgetting all precaution, he pressed eagerly forward, and stopped before the gate. There was no sound from within; there had evidently been no challenge nor interruption. She was safe.

CHAPTER VII

THE reappearance of Chivers in the mill with Collinson, and the brief announcement that the prisoner had consented to a satisfactory compromise, were received at first with a half-contemptuous smile by the party; but for the commands of their leaders, and possibly a conviction that Collinson's fatuous coöperation with Chivers would be safer than his wrath, which might not expend itself only on Chivers, but imperil the safety of all, it is probable that they would have informed the unfortunate prisoner of his real relations to his captor. In these circumstances, Chivers's half-satirical suggestion that Collinson should be added to the sentries outside, and guard his own property, was surlily assented to by Riggs, and complacently accepted by the others. Chivers offered to post him himself, — not without an interchange of meaning glances with Riggs, — Collinson's own gun was returned to him, and the strangely assorted pair left the mill amicably together.

But however humanly confident Chivers was in his companion's faithfulness, he was not without a rascal's precaution, and determined to select a position for Collinson where he could do the least damage in any aberration of trust. At the top of the grade, above the mill, was the only trail by which a party in force could approach it. This was to Chivers obviously too strategic a position to intrust to his prisoner, and the sentry who guarded its approach, five hundred yards away, was left unchanged. But there was another "blind" trail, or cut-off, to the left, through the thickest undergrowth of the woods, known only to his party. To place Collinson there was to insure him perfect immunity from the approach of an enemy, as well as from any confidential advances of his fellow sentry. This done, he drew a cigar from his pocket, and handing it to Collinson, lighted another for himself, and leaning back comfortably against a large boulder, glanced complacently at his companion.

"You may smoke until I go, Mr. Collinson, and even afterwards, if you keep the bowl of your pipe behind a rock, so as to be out of sight of your fellow sentry, whose advances, by the way, if I were you, I should not encourage. Your position here, you see, is a rather peculiar one. You were saying, I think, that a lingering affection for your wife impelled you to keep this place for her, although you were convinced of her death?"

Collinson's unaffected delight in Chivers's kindliness had made his eyes shine in the moonlight with a doglike wistfulness. "I reckon I did say that, Mr. Chivers," he said apologetically, "though it ain't goin' to interfere with you usin' the shanty jest now."

"I was n't alluding to that, Collinson," returned Chivers, with a large rhetorical wave of the hand, and an equal enjoyment in his companion's evident admiration of him, "but it struck me that your remark, nevertheless, implied some doubt of your wife's death, and I don't know but that your doubts are right."

"Wot's that?" said Collinson, with a dull glow in his face.

Chivers blew the smoke of his cigar lazily in the still air. "Listen," he said. "Since your miraculous conversion a few moments ago, I have made some friendly inquiries about you, and I find that you lost all trace of your wife in Texas in '52, where a number of her fellow emigrants died of yellow fever. Is that so?"

"Yes," said Collinson quickly.

"Well, it so happens that a friend of mine," continued Chivers slowly, "was in a train which followed that one, and picked up and brought on some of the survivors."

"That was the train wot brought the news," said Collinson, relapsing into his old patience. "That's how I knowed she had n't come."

"Did you ever hear the names of any of its passengers?" said Chivers, with a keen glance at his companion.

"Nary one! I only got to know it was a small train of only two wagons, and it sorter melted into Californy through a southern pass, and kinder petered out, and no one ever heard of it agin, and that was all."

"That was *not* all, Collinson," said Chivers lazily. "*I* saw the train arrive at South Pass. I was awaiting a friend and his wife. There was a lady with them, one of the survivors. I did n't hear her name, but I think my friend's wife called her 'Sadie.' I remember her as a rather pretty woman — tall, fair, with a straight nose and a full chin, and small slim feet. I saw her only a moment, for she was on her way to Los Angeles, and was, I believe, going to join her husband somewhere in the Sierras."

The rascal had been enjoying with intense satisfaction the return of the dull glow in Collinson's face, that even seemed to animate the whole length of his angular frame as it turned eagerly towards him. So he went on, experiencing a devilish zest in this description of his mistress to her husband, apart from the pleasure of noting the slow awakening of this apathetic giant, with a sensation akin to having warmed him into life. Yet his triumph was of short duration. The fire dropped suddenly out of Collinson's eyes, the glow from his face, and the dull look of unwearied patience returned.

"That's all very kind and purty of yer, Mr. Chivers," he said gravely; "you've got all my wife's p'ints thar to a dot, and it seems to fit her jest like a shoe I picked up t' other day. But it was n't my Sadie, for ef she 's living or had lived, she 'd bin just yere!"

The same fear and recognition of some unknown reserve in this trustful man came over Chivers as before. In his angry resentment of it he would have liked to blurt out the infidelity of the wife before her husband, but he knew Collinson would not believe him, and he had another purpose now. His full lips twisted into a suave smile.

"While I would not give you false hopes, Mr. Collinson," he said, with a bland smile, "my interest in you compels me to say that you may be over confident and wrong. There are a thousand things that may have prevented your wife from coming to you, — illness, possibly the result of her exposure, poverty, misapprehension of your place of meeting, and, above all, perhaps some false report of your own death. Has it ever occurred to you that it is as possible for her to have been deceived in that way as for you?"

"Wot yer say?" said Collinson, with a vague suspicion.

"What I mean. You think yourself justified in believing your wife dead, because she did not seek you here; may she not feel herself equally justified in believing the same of you, because you had not sought her elsewhere?"

"But it was writ that she was comin' yere, and — I boarded every train that come in that fall," said Collinson, with a new irritation, unlike his usual calm.

"Except one, my dear Collinson, — except one," returned Chivers, holding up a fat forefinger smilingly. "And that may be the clue. Now, listen! There is still a chance of following it, if you will. The names of my friends were Mr. and Mrs. Barker. I regret," he added, with a perfunctory cough, "that poor Barker is dead. He was not such an exemplary husband as you are, my dear Collinson, and I fear was not all that Mrs. Barker could have wished;

enough that he succumbed from various excesses, and did not leave me Mrs. Barker's present address. But she has a young friend, a ward, living at the Convent of Santa Luisa, whose name is Miss Rivers, who can put you in communication with her. Now, one thing more: I can understand your feelings, and that you would wish at once to satisfy your mind. It is not, perhaps, to my interest nor the interest of my party to advise you, but," he continued, glancing around him, "you have an admirably secluded position here, on the edge of the trail, and if you are missing from your post to-morrow morning, I shall respect your feelings, trust to your honor to keep this secret, and — consider it useless to pursue you!"

There was neither shame nor pity in his heart as the deceived man turned towards him with tremulous eagerness, and grasped his hand in silent gratitude. But the old rage and fear returned, as Collinson said gravely: —

"You kinder put a new life inter me, Mr. Chivers, and I wish I had yer gift o' speech to tell ye so. But I 've passed my word to the capting thar and to the rest o' you folks that I 'd stand guard out yere, and I don't go back o' my word. I mout, and I mout n't find my Sadie; but she would n't think the less o' me, arter these years o' waitin', ef I stayed here another night, to guard the house I keep in trust for her, and the strangers I 've took in on her account."

"As you like, then," said Chivers, contracting his lips, "but keep your own counsel to-night. There may be those who would like to deter you from your search. And now I will leave you alone in this delightful moonlight. I quite envy you your unrestricted communion with nature. Adios, amigo, adios!"

He leaped lightly on a large rock that overhung the edge of the grade, and waved his hand.

"I would n't do that, Mr. Chivers," said Collinson, with a concerned face; "them rocks are mighty ticklish, and that one in partiklar. A tech sometimes sends 'em scooting."

Mr. Chivers leaped quickly to the ground, turned, waved his hand again, and disappeared down the grade.

But Collinson was no longer alone. Hitherto his characteristic reveries had been of the past, — reminiscences in which there was only recollection, no imagination, and very little hope. Under the spell of Chivers's words his fancy seemed to expand; he began to think of his wife as she might be now, — perhaps ill, despairing, wandering hopelessly, even ragged and footsore, or — believing *him* dead — relapsing into the resigned patience that had been his own; but always a new Sadie, whom he had never seen or known before.

A faint dread, the lightest of misgivings (perhaps coming from his very ignorance), for the first time touched his steadfast heart, and sent a chill through it. He shouldered his weapon, and walked briskly toward the edge of the thick-set woods. There were the fragrant essences of the laurel and spruce — baked in the long-day sunshine that had encompassed their recesses — still coming warm to his face; there were the strange shiftings of temperature throughout the openings, that alternately warmed and chilled him as he walked. It seemed so odd that he should now have to seek her instead of her coming to him; it would never be the same meeting to him, away from the house that he had built for her! He strolled back, and looked down upon it, nestling on the ledge. The white moonlight that lay upon it dulled the glitter of lights in its windows, but the sounds of laughter and singing came to even his unfastidious ears with a sense of vague discord. He walked back again, and began to pace before the thick-set wood. Suddenly he stopped and listened.

To any other ears but those accustomed to mountain solitude it would have seemed nothing. But, familiar as he was with all the infinite disturbances of the woodland, and even the simulation of intrusion caused by a falling branch or lapsing pine-cone, he was arrested now by a recurring sound, unlike any other. It was an occasional muffled beat — interrupted at uncertain intervals, but always returning in regular rhythm, whenever it was audible. He knew it was made by a cantering horse; that the intervals were due to the patches of dead leaves in its course, and that the varying movement was the effect of its progress through obstacles and underbrush. It was therefore coming through some "blind" cut-off in the thick-set wood. The shifting of the sound also showed that the rider was unfamiliar with the locality, and sometimes wandered from the direct course; but the unfailing and accelerating persistency of the sound, in spite of these difficulties, indicated haste and determination.

He swung his gun from his shoulder, and examined its caps. As the sound came nearer, he drew up beside a young spruce at the entrance of the thicket. There was no necessity to alarm the house, or call the other sentry. It was a single horse and rider, and he was equal to that. He waited quietly, and with his usual fateful patience. Even then his thoughts still reverted to his wife; and it was with a singular feeling that he at last saw the thick underbrush give way before a woman, mounted on a sweating but still spirited horse, who swept out into the open. Nevertheless, he stopped in front of her, and called: —

"Hold up thar!"

The horse recoiled, nearly unseating her. Collinson caught the reins. She lifted her whip mechanically, yet remained holding it in the air, trembling, until she slipped, half struggling, half helplessly, from the saddle to the ground. Here she would have again fallen, but Collinson caught her sharply by the waist. At his touch she started and uttered a frightened "No!" At her voice Collinson started.

"Sadie!" he gasped.

"Seth!" she half whispered.

They stood looking at each other. But Collinson was already himself again. The man of simple directness and no imagination saw only his wife before him — a little breathless, a little flurried, a little disheveled from rapid riding, as he had sometimes seen her before, but otherwise unchanged. Nor had *he* changed; he took her up where he had left her years ago. His grave face only broadened into a smile, as he held both her hands in his.

"Yes, it 's me — Lordy! Why, I was comin' only to-morrow to find ye, Sade!"

She glanced hurriedly around her. "To — to find me?" she said incredulously.

"Sartain! That ez, I was goin' to ask about ye, — goin' to ask about ye at the convent."

"At the convent?" she echoed with a frightened amazement.

"Yes, why, Lordy! Sade — don't you see? You thought I was dead, and I thought you was dead, — that 's what 's the matter. But I never reckoned that you 'd think me dead until Chivers allowed that it must be so."

Her face whitened in the moonlight. "Chivers?" she said blankly.

"In course; but nat'rally you don't know him, honey. He only saw you onc't. But it was along o' that, Sade, that he told me he reckoned you was n't dead, and told me how to find you. He was mighty kind and consarned about it, and he even allowed I 'd better slip off to you this very night."

"Chivers," she repeated, gazing at her husband with bloodless lips.

"Yes, an awful purty-spoken man. Ye 'll have to get to know him, Sade. He 's here with some of his folks az hez got inter trouble — I 'm forgettin' to tell ye. You see" —

"Yes, yes, yes!" she interrupted hysterically; "and this is the mill?"

"Yes, lovey, the mill — my mill — *your* mill — the house I built for you, dear. I 'd show it to you now, but you see, Sade, I 'm out here standin' guard."

"Are *you* one of them?" she said, clutching his hand desperately.

"No, dear," he said soothingly, — "no; only, you see, I giv' my word to 'em as I giv' my house to-night, and I 'm bound to protect them and see 'em through. Why, Lordy! Sade, you 'd have done the same — for Chivers."

"Yes, yes," she said, beating her hands together strangely, "of course. He was so kind to bring me back to you. And you might have never found me but for him."

She burst into an hysterical laugh, which the simple-minded man might have overlooked but for the tears that coursed down her bloodless face.

"What 's gone o' ye, Sadie?" he said in a sudden fear, grasping her hands; "that laugh ain't your'n — that voice ain't your'n. You 're the old Sadie, ain't ye?" He stopped. For a moment his face blanched as he glanced towards the mill, from which the faint sound of bacchanalian voices came to his quick ear. "Sadie, dear, ye ain't thinkin' anythin' agin' me? Ye ain't allowin' I 'm keeping anythin' back from ye?"

Her face stiffened into rigidity; she dashed the tears from her eyes. "No," she said quickly. Then after a moment she added, with a faint laugh, "You see we have n't seen each other for so long — it 's all so sudden — so unexpected."

"But you kem here, just now, calkilatin' to find me?" said Collinson gravely.

"Yes, yes," she said quickly, still grasping both his hands, but with her head slightly turned in the direction of the mill.

"But who told ye where to find the mill?" he said, with gentle patience.

"A friend," she said hurriedly. "Perhaps," she added, with a singular smile, "a friend of the friend who told you."

"I see," said Collinson, with a relieved face and a broadening smile, "it's a sort of fairy story. I'll bet, now, it was that old Barker woman that Chivers knows."

Her teeth gleamed rigidly together in the moonlight, like a death's-head. "Yes," she said dryly, "it was that old Barker woman. Say, Seth," she continued, moistening her lips slowly, "you're guarding this place alone?"

"Thar's another feller up the trail, — a sentry, — but don't you be afeard, he can't hear us, Sade."

"On this side of the mill?"

"Yes! Why, Lord love ye, Sadie! t' other side o' the mill it drops down straight to the valley; nobody comes yer that way but poor low-down emigrants. And it's miles round to come by the valley from the summit."

"You did n't hear your friend Chivers say that the sheriff was out with his posse to-night hunting them?"

"No. Did you?"

"I think I heard something of that kind at Skinner's, but it may have been only a warning to me, traveling alone."

"Thet's so," said Collinson, with a tender solicitude, "but none o' these yer road-agents would have teched a woman. And this yer Chivers ain't the man to insult one, either."

"No," she said, with a return of her hysteric laugh. But it was overlooked by Collinson, who was taking his gun from beside the tree where he had placed it. "Where are you going?" she said suddenly.

"I reckon them fellers ought to be warned o' what you heard. I 'll be back in a minit."

"And you 're going to leave me now — when — when we 've only just met after these years ?" she said, with a faint attempt at a smile, which, however, did not reach the cold glitter of her eyes.

"Just for a little, honey. Besides, don't you see, I 've got to get excused ; for we 'll have to go off to Skinner's or somewhere, Sadie, for we can't stay in thar along o' them."

"So you and your wife are turned out of your home to please Chivers," she said, still smiling.

"That 's whar you slip up, Sadie," said Collinson, with a troubled face ; "for he 's that kind of a man thet if I jest as much as hinted you was here, he 'd turn 'em all out o' the house for a lady. Thet 's why I don't propose to let on anything about you till to-morrow."

"To-morrow will do," she said, still smiling, but with a singular abstraction in her face. "Pray don't disturb them now. You say there is another sentinel beyond. He is enough to warn them of any approach from the trail. I 'm tired and ill — very ill ! Sit by me here, Seth, and wait ! We can wait here together — we have waited so long, Seth, — and the end has come now."

She suddenly lapsed against the tree, and slipped in a sitting posture to the ground. Collinson cast himself at her side, and put his arm around her.

"Wot 's gone o' ye, Sade ? You 're cold and sick. Listen. Your hoss is just over thar feedin'. I 'll put you back on him, run in and tell 'em I 'm off, and be with ye in a jiffy, and take ye back to Skinner's."

"Wait," she said softly. "Wait."

"Or to the Silver Hollow — it 's not so far."

She had caught his hands again, her rigid face close to his. "What hollow ? — speak !" she said breathlessly.

"The hollow whar a friend o' mine struck silver. He 'll take yur in."

Her head sank against his shoulder. "Let me stay here," she answered, "and wait."

He supported her tenderly, feeling the gentle brushing of her hair against his cheek as in the old days. He was content to wait, holding her thus. They were very silent; her eyes half closed, as if in exhaustion, yet with the strange suggestion of listening in the vacant pupils.

"Ye ain't hearin' anythin', deary?" he said, with a troubled face.

"No; but everything is so deathly still," she said in a frightened whisper.

It certainly was very still. A singular hush seemed to have slid over the landscape; there was no longer any sound from the mill; there was an ominous rest in the woodland, so perfect that the tiny rustle of an uneasy wing in the tree above them had made them start; even the moonlight seemed to hang suspended in the air.

"It 's like the lull before the storm," she said with her strange laugh.

But the non-imaginative Collinson was more practical. "It 's mighty like that earthquake weather before the big shake thet dried up the river and stopped the mill. That was just the time I got the news o' your bein' dead with yellow fever. Lord! honey, I allus allowed to myself thet suthin' was happenin' to ye then."

She did not reply; but he, holding her figure closer to him, felt it trembling with a nervous expectation. Suddenly she threw him off, and rose to her feet with a cry. "There!" she screamed frantically, "they 've come! they 've come!"

A rabbit had run out into the moonlight before them, a gray fox had dashed from the thicket into the wood, but nothing else.

"Who 's come?" said Collinson, staring at her.

"The sheriff and his posse! They 're surrounding them now. Don't you hear?" she gasped.

There was a strange rattling in the direction of the mill, a dull rumble, with wild shouts and outcries, and the trampling of feet on its wooden platform. Collinson staggered to his feet; but at the same moment he was thrown violently against his wife, and they both clung helplessly to the tree, with their eyes turned toward the ledge. There was a dense cloud of dust and haze hanging over it.

She uttered another cry, and ran swiftly towards the rocky grade. Collinson ran quickly after her, but as she reached the grade he suddenly shouted, with an awful revelation in his voice, "Come back! Stop, Sadie, for God's sake!" But it was too late. She had already disappeared; and as he reached the rock on which Chivers had leaped, he felt it give way beneath him.

But there was no sound, only a rush of wind from the valley below. Everything lapsed again into its awful stillness. As the cloud lifted from where the mill had stood, the moon shone only upon empty space. There was a singular murmuring and whispering from the woods beyond that increased in sound, and an hour later the dry bed of the old mill-stream was filled with a rushing river.

CHAPTER VIII

Preble Key returned to his hotel from the convent, it is to be feared, with very little of that righteous satisfaction which is supposed to follow the performance of a good deed. He was by no means certain that what he had done was best for the young girl. He had only shown himself to her as a worldly monitor of dangers, of which her innocence was providentially unconscious. In his feverish haste to avert a scandal, he had no chance to explain his real feelings; he had, perhaps, even exposed her thwarted impulses to equally naïve but more dangerous expression, which he might not have the opportunity to check. He tossed wakefully that night upon his pillow, tormented with alternate visions of her adorable presence at the hotel, and her bowed, renunciating figure as she reëntered the convent gate. He waited expectantly the next day for the message she had promised, and which he believed she would find some way to send. But no message was forthcoming. The day passed, and he became alarmed. The fear that her escapade had been discovered again seized him. If she were in close restraint, she could neither send to him, nor could he convey to her the solicitude and sympathy that filled his heart. In her childish frankness she might have confessed the whole truth, and this would not only shut the doors of the convent against him, under his former pretext, but compromise her still more if he boldly called. He waylaid the afternoon procession; she was not among them. Utterly despairing, the wildest plans for seeing her passed through his brain, — plans that recalled his hotheaded youth, and a few moments later made him smile at his extravagance, even while it half frightened him at the reality of his passion. He reached the hotel heart-sick and desperate. The porter met him on the steps. It was with a thrill that sent the blood leaping to his cheeks that he heard the man say: —

"Sister Seraphina is waiting for you in the sitting-room."

There was no thought of discovery or scandal in Preble Key's mind now; no doubt or hesitation as to what he would do, as he sprang up the staircase. He only knew that he had found her again, and was happy! He burst into the room, but this time remembered to shut the door behind him. He looked eagerly towards the window where she had stood the day before, but now she rose quickly from the sofa in the corner, where she had been seated, and the missal she had been reading rolled from her lap to the floor. He ran towards her to pick it up. Her name — the name she had told him to call her — was passionately trembling on his lips, when she slowly put her veil aside, and displayed a pale, kindly, middle-aged face, slightly marked by old scars of smallpox. It was not Alice — it was the real Sister Seraphina who stood before him.

His first revulsion of bitter disappointment was so quickly followed by a realization that all had been discovered, and his sacrifice of yesterday had gone for naught, that he stood before her, stammering, but without the power to say a word. Luckily for him, his utter embarrassment seemed to reassure her, and to calm that timidity which his brusque man-like irruption might well produce in the inexperienced, contemplative mind of the recluse. Her voice was very sweet, albeit sad, as she said gently: —

"I am afraid I have taken you by surprise; but there was no time to arrange for a meeting, and the Lady Superior thought that I, who knew all the facts, had better see you confidentially. Father Cipriano gave us your address."

Amazed and wondering, Key bowed her to a seat.

"You will remember," she went on softly, "that the Lady Superior failed to get any information from you regarding the brother of one of our dear children, whom he committed to our charge through a — a companion or acquaintance — a Mrs. Barker. As she was armed with his authority by letter, we accepted the dear child through her, permitted her as his representative to have free access to his sister, and even allowed her, as an unattended woman, to pass the night at the convent. We were therefore surprised this morning to receive a letter from him, absolutely forbidding any further intercourse, correspondence, or association of his sister with this companion, Mrs. Barker. It was necessary to inform the dear child of this at once, as she was on the point of writing to this woman; but we were pained and shocked at her reception of her brother's wishes. I ought to say, in justice to the dear child, that while she is usually docile, intelligent, and tractable to discipline, and a dévote in her religious feelings, she is singularly impulsive. But we were not prepared for the rash and sudden step she has taken. At noon to-day she escaped from the convent!"

Key, who had been following her with relief, sprang to his feet at this unexpected culmination.

"Escaped!" he said. "Impossible! I mean," he added, hurriedly recalling himself, "your rules, your discipline, your attendants are so perfect."

"The poor impulsive creature has added sacrilege to her madness — a sacrilege we are willing to believe she did not understand, for she escaped in a religious habit — my own."

"But this would sufficiently identify her," he said, controlling himself with an effort.

"Alas, not so! There are many of us who go abroad on our missions in these garments, and they are made all alike, so as to divert rather than to attract attention to any individuality. We have sent private messengers in all directions, and sought her everywhere, but without success. You will understand that we wish to avoid scandal, which a more public inquiry would create."

"And you come to me," said Key, with a return of his first suspicion, in spite of his eagerness to cut short the interview and be free to act, — "to me, almost a stranger?"

"Not a stranger, Mr. Key," returned the religieuse gently, "but to a well-known man — a man of affairs in the country where this unhappy child's brother lives — a friend who seems to be sent by Heaven to find out this brother for us, and speed this news to him. We come to the old pupil of Father Cipriano, a friend of the Holy Church; to the kindly gentleman who knows what it is to have dear relations of his own, and who only yesterday was seeking the convent to" —

"Enough!" interrupted Key hurriedly, with a slight color. "I will go at once. I do not know this man, but I will do my best to find him. And this — this — young girl? You say you have no trace of her? May she not still be here? I should have some clue by which to seek her — I mean that I could give to her brother."

"Alas! we fear she is already far away from here. If she went at once to San Luis, she could have easily taken a train to San Francisco before we discovered her flight. We believe that it was the poor child's intent to join her brother, so as to intercede for her friend — or, perhaps, alas! to seek her."

"And this friend left yesterday morning?" he said quickly, yet concealing a feeling of relief. "Well, you may depend on me! And now, as there is no time to be lost, I will make my arrangements to take the next train."

He held out his hand, paused, and said in almost boyish embarrassment: "Bid me God speed, Sister Seraphina!"

"May the Holy Virgin aid you," she said gently. Yet, as she passed out of the door, with a grateful smile, a characteristic reaction came over Key. His romantic belief in the interposition of Providence was not without a tendency to apply the ordinary rules of human evidence to such phenomena. Sister Seraphina's application to him seemed little short of miraculous interference; but what if it were only a trick to get rid of him, while the girl, whose escapade had been discovered, was either under restraint in the convent, or hiding in Santa Luisa? Yet this did not prevent him from mechanically continuing his arrangements for departure. When they were completed, and he had barely time to get to the station at San Luis, he again lingered in vague expectation of some determining event.

The appearance of a servant with a telegraphic message at this moment seemed to be an answer to this instinctive feeling. He tore it open hastily. But it was only a single line from his foreman at the mine, which had been repeated to him from the company's office in San Francisco. It read, "Come at once — important."

Disappointed as it left him, it determined his action; and as the train steamed out of San Luis, it for a while diverted his attention from the object of his pursuit. In any event, his destination would have been Skinner's or the Hollow, as the point from which to begin his search. He believed with Sister Seraphina that the young girl would make her direct appeal to her brother; but even if she sought Mrs. Barker, it would still be at some of the haunts of the gang. The letter to the Lady Superior had been postmarked from "Bald Top," which Key knew to be an obscure settlement less frequented than Skinner's. Even then it was hardly possible that the chief of the road-agents would present himself at the post-office, and it had probably been left by some less-known member of the gang. A vague idea, that was hardly a suspicion, that the girl might have a secret address of her brother's, without understanding the reasons for its secrecy, came into his mind. A still more vague hope, that he might meet her before she found her brother, upheld him. It would be an accidental meeting on her part, for he no longer dared to hope that she would seek or trust him again. And it was with very little of his old sanguine quality that, travel-worn and weary, he at last alighted at Skinner's. But his half careless inquiry if any lady passengers had lately arrived there, to his embarrassment produced a broad smile on the face of Skinner.

"You 're the second man that asked that question, Mr. Key," he said.

"The second man?" ejaculated Key nervously.

"Yes; the first was the sheriff of Sierra. He wanted to find a tall, good-looking woman, about thirty, with black eyes. I hope that ain't the kind o' girl you 're looking arter — is it? for I reckon she 's gin you both the slip."

Key protested with a forced laugh that it was not, yet suddenly hesitated to describe Alice; for he instantly recognized the portrait of her friend, the assumed Mrs. Barker. Skinner continued in lazy confidence: —

"Ye see they say that the sheriff had sorter got the dead wood on that gang o' road-agents, and had hemmed 'em in somewhar betwixt Bald Top and Collinson's. But that woman was one o' their spies, and spotted his little game, and managed to give 'em the tip, so they got clean away. Anyhow, they ain't bin heard from since. But the big shake has made scoutin' along the ledges rather stiff work for the sheriff. They say the valley near Long Cañon 's chock full o' rock and slumgullion that 's slipped down."

"What do you mean by the big shake?" asked Key in surprise.

"Great Scott! you did n't hear of it? Did n't hear of the 'arthquake that shook us up all along Galloper's the other night? Well," he added disgustedly, "that 's jist the conceit of them folks in the bay, that can't allow that *anythin'* happens in the mountains!"

The urgent telegrams of his foreman now flashed across Key's preoccupied mind. Possibly Skinner saw his concern. "I reckon your mine is all right, Mr. Key. One of your men was over yere last night, and did n't say nothin'."

But this did not satisfy Key; and in a few minutes he had mounted his horse and was speeding towards the Hollow, with a remorseful consciousness of having neglected his colleagues' interests. For himself, in the utter prepossession of his passion for Alice, he cared nothing. As he dashed down the slope to the Hollow, he thought only of the two momentous days that she had passed there, and the fate that had brought them so nearly together. There was nothing to recall its sylvan beauty in the hideous works that now possessed it, or the substantial dwelling-house that had taken the place of the old cabin. A few hurried questions to the foreman satisfied him of the integrity of the property. There had been some alarm in the shaft, but there was no subsidence of the "seam," nor any difficulty in the working. "What I telegraphed you for, Mr. Key, was about something that has cropped up way back o' the earthquake. We were served here the other day with a legal notice of a claim to the mine, on account of previous work done on the ledge by the last occupant."

"But the cabin was built by a gang of thieves, who used it as a hoard for their booty," returned Key hotly, "and every one of them are outlaws, and have no standing before the law." He stopped with a pang as he thought of Alice. And the blood rushed to his cheeks as the foreman quietly continued: —

"But the claim ain't in any o' their names. It 's allowed to be the gift of their leader to his young sister, afore the outlawry, and it 's in *her* name — Alice Riggs or something."

Of the half-dozen tumultuous thoughts that passed through Key's mind, only one remained. It was purely an act of the brother's to secure some possible future benefit for his sister. And of this she was perfectly ignorant! He recovered himself quickly, and said with a smile: —

"But *I* discovered the ledge and its argentiferous character myself. There was no trace or sign of previous discovery or mining occupation."

"So I jedged, and so I said, and thet puts ye all right. But I thought I 'd tell ye; for mining laws is mining laws, and it 's the one thing ye can't get over," he added, with the peculiar superstitious reverence of the Californian miner for that vested authority.

But Key scarcely listened. All that he had heard seemed only to link him more fatefully and indissolubly with the young girl. He was already impatient of even this slight delay in his quest. In his perplexity his thoughts had reverted to Collinson's: the mill was a good point to begin his search from; its good-natured, stupid proprietor might be his guide, his ally, and even his confidant.

When his horse was baited, he was again in the saddle. "If yer going Collinson's way, yer might ask him if he 's lost a horse," said the foreman. "The morning after the shake, some of the boys picked up a mustang, with a make-up lady's saddle on." Key started! While it was impossible that it could have been ridden by Alice, it might have been by the woman who had preceded her.

"Did you make any search?" he inquired eagerly; "there may have been an accident."

"I reckon it was n't no accident," returned the foreman coolly, "for the riata was loose and trailing, as if it had been staked out, and broken away."

Without another word, Key put spurs to his horse and galloped away, leaving his companion staring after him. Here was a clue: the horse could not have strayed far; the broken tether indicated a camp; the gang had been gathered somewhere in the vicinity where Mrs. Barker had warned them, — perhaps in the wood beyond Collinson's. He would penetrate it alone. He knew his danger; but as a *single* unarmed man he might be admitted to the presence of the leader, and the alleged claim was a sufficient excuse. What he would say or do afterwards depended upon chance. It was a wild scheme — but he was reckless. Yet he would go to Collinson's first.

At the end of two hours he reached the thick-set wood that gave upon the shelf at the top of the grade which descended to the mill. As he emerged from the wood into the bursting sunlight of the valley below, he sharply reined in his horse and stopped. Another bound would have been his last. For the shelf, the rocky grade itself, the ledge below, and the mill upon it, were all gone! The crumbling outer wall of the rocky grade had slipped away into immeasurable depths below, leaving only the sharp edge of a cliff, which incurved towards the woods that had once stood behind the mill, but which now bristled on the very edge of a precipice. A mist was hanging over its brink and rising from the valley; it was a full-fed stream that was coursing through the former dry bed of the river and falling down the face of the bluff. He rubbed his eyes, dismounted, crept along the edge of the precipice, and looked below: whatever had subsided and melted down into its thousand feet of depth, there was no trace left upon its smooth face. Scarcely an angle of drift or débris marred the perpendicular; the burial of all ruin was deep and compact; the erasure had been swift and sure — the obliteration complete. It might have been the precipitation of ages, and not of a single night. At that remote distance it even seemed as if grass were already growing over this enormous sepulchre, but it was only the tops of the buried pines. The absolute silence, the utter absence of any mark of convulsive struggle, even the lulling whimper of falling waters, gave the scene a pastoral repose.

So profound was the impression upon Key and his human passion that it at first seemed an ironical and eternal ending of his quest. It was with difficulty that he reasoned that the catastrophe occurred before Alice's flight, and that even Collinson might have had time to escape. He slowly skirted the edge of the chasm, and made his way back through the empty woods behind the old mill-site toward the place where he had dismounted. His horse seemed to have strayed into the shadows of this covert; but as he approached him, he was amazed to see that it was not his own, and that a woman's scarf was lying over its side-saddle. A wild idea seized him, and found expression in an impulsive cry: —

"Alice!"

The woods echoed it; there was an interval of silence, and then a faint response. But it was *her* voice. He ran eagerly forward in that direction, and called again; the response was nearer this time, and then the tall ferns parted, and her lithe, graceful figure came running, stumbling, and limping toward him like a wounded fawn. Her face was pale and agitated, the tendrils of her light hair were straying over her shoulder, and one of the sleeves of her school-gown was stained with blood and dust. He caught the white and trembling hands that were thrust out to him eagerly.

"It is *you!*" she gasped. "I prayed for some one to come, but I did not dream it would be *you.* And then I heard *your* voice — and I thought it could be only a dream until you called a second time."

"But you are hurt," he exclaimed passionately. "You have met with some accident!"

"No, no!" she said eagerly. "Not *I*—but a poor, poor man I found lying on the edge of the cliff. I could not help him much, I did not care to leave him. No one *would* come! I have been with him alone, all the morning! Come quick, he may be dying."

He passed his arm around her waist unconsciously; she permitted it as unconsciously, as he half supported her figure while they hurried forward.

"He had been crushed by something, and was just hanging over the ledge, and could not move nor speak," she went on quickly. "I dragged him away to a tree,—it took me hours to move him, he was so heavy,—and I got him some water from the stream and bathed his face, and blooded all my sleeve."

"But what were you doing here?" he asked quickly.

A faint blush crossed the pallor of her delicate cheek. She looked away quickly. "I—was going to find my brother at Bald Top," she replied at last hurriedly. "But don't ask me now—only come quick, do."

"Is the wounded man conscious? Did you speak with him? Does he know who you are?" asked Key uneasily.

"No! he only moaned a little and opened his eyes when I dragged him. I don't think he even knew what had happened."

They hurried on again. The wood lightened suddenly.

"Here!" she said in a half whisper, and stepped timidly into the open light. Only a few feet from the fatal ledge, against the roots of a buckeye, with *her* shawl thrown over him, lay the wounded man.

Key started back. It was Collinson!

His head and shoulders seemed uninjured; but as Key lifted the shawl, he saw that the long, lank figure appeared to melt away below the waist into a mass of shapeless and dirty rags. Key hurriedly replaced the shawl, and, bending over him, listened to his hurried respiration and the beating of his heart. Then he pressed a drinking-flask to his lips. The spirit seemed to revive him; he slowly opened his eyes. They fell upon Key with quick recognition. But the look changed; one could see that he was trying to rise, but that no movement of the limbs accompanied that effort of will, and his old patient, resigned look returned. Key shuddered. There was some injury to the spine. The man was paralyzed.

"I can't get up, Mr. Key," he said in a faint but untroubled voice, "nor seem to move my arms, but you 'll just allow that I 've shook hands with ye — all the same."

"How did this happen?" said Key anxiously.

"Thet 's wot gets me! Sometimes I reckon I know, and sometimes I don't. Lyin' thar on thet ledge all last night, and only jest able to look down into the old valley, sometimes it seemed to me ez if I fell over and got caught in the rocks trying to save my wife; but then when I kem to think sensible, and know my wife was n't there at all, I get mystified. Sometimes I think I got ter thinkin' of my wife only when this yer young gal thet 's bin like an angel to me kem here and dragged me off the ledge, for you see she don't belong here, and hez dropped on to me like a sperrit."

"Then you were not in the house when the shock came?" said Key.

"No. You see the mill was filled with them fellers as the sheriff was arter, and it went over with 'em — and I" —

"Alice," said Key, with a white face, "would you mind going to my horse, which you will find somewhere near yours, and bringing me a medicine case from my saddle-bags?"

The innocent girl glanced quickly at her companion, saw the change in his face, and, attributing it to the imminent danger of the injured man, at once glided away. When she was out of hearing, Key leaned gravely over him: —

"Collinson, I must trust you with a secret. I am afraid that this poor girl who helped you is the sister of the leader of that gang the sheriff was in pursuit of. She has been kept in perfect ignorance of her brother's crimes. She must *never* know them — nor even know his fate! If he perished utterly in this catastrophe, as it would seem — it was God's will to spare her that knowledge. I tell you this, to warn you in anything you say before her. She *must* believe, as I shall try to make her believe, that he has gone back to the States — where she will perhaps, hereafter, believe that he died. Better that she should know nothing — and keep her thought of him unchanged."

"I see — I see — I see, Mr. Key," murmured the injured man. "Thet 's wot I 've been sayin' to myself lyin' here all night. Thet 's wot I bin sayin' o' my wife Sadie, — her that I actooally got to think kem back to me last night. You see I 'd heerd from one o' those fellars that a woman like unto her had been picked up in Texas and brought on yere, and that mebbee she was somewhar in Californy. I was that foolish — and that ontrue to her, all the while knowin', as I once told you, Mr. Key, that ef she 'd been alive she 'd bin yere — that I believed it true for a minit! And that was why, afore this happened, I had a dream, right out yer, and dreamed she kem to me, all white and troubled, through the woods. At first I thought it war my Sadie; but when I see she war n't like her old self, and her voice was strange and her laugh was strange — then I knowed it was n't her, and I was dreamin'. You 're right, Mr. Key, in wot you got off just now — wot was it? Better to know nothin' — and keep the old thoughts unchanged."

"Have you any pain?" asked Key after a pause.

"No; I kinder feel easier now."

Key looked at his changing face. "Tell me," he said gently, 'if it does not tax your strength, all that has happened here, all you know. It is for *her* sake."

Thus adjured, with his eyes fixed on Key, Collinson narrated his story from the irruption of the outlaws to the final catastrophe. Even then he palliated their outrage with his characteristic patience, keeping still his strange fascination for Chivers, and his blind belief in his miserable wife. The story was at times broken by lapses of faintness, by a singular return of his old abstraction and forgetfulness in the midst of a sentence, and at last by a fit of coughing, that left a few crimson bubbles on the corners of his mouth. Key lifted his eyes anxiously; there was some grave internal injury, which the dying man's resolute patience had suppressed. Yet, at the sound of Alice's returning step, Collinson's eyes brightened, apparently as much at her coming as from the effect of the powerful stimulant Key had taken from his medicine case.

"I thank ye, Mr. Key," he said faintly; "for I 've got an idea I ain't got no great time before me, and I 've got suthin' to say to you afore witnesses" — his eyes sought Alice's in half apology — "afore witnesses, you understand. Would you mind standin' out thar, afore me, in the light, so I kin see you both, and you, miss, rememberin', ez a witness, suthin' I got to tell to him? You might take his hand, miss, to make it more regular and law-like."

The two did as he bade them, standing side by side, painfully humoring what seemed to them to be wanderings of a dying man.

"Thar was a young fellow," said Collinson in a steady voice, "ez kem to my shanty a night ago on his way to the — the — valley. He was a sprightly young fellow, gay and chipper-like, and he sez to me, confidential-like, 'Collinson,' sez he, 'I 'm off to the States this very night on business of importance; mebbee I 'll be away a long time — for years! You know,' sez he, 'Mr. Key, in the Hollow?

Go to him,' sez he, 'and tell him ez how I had n't time to get to see him; tell him,' sez he, 'that *Rivers'* — you 've got the name, Mr. Key? — you 've got the name, miss? — 'that *Rivers* wants him to say this to his little sister from her lovin' brother. And tell him,' sez he, this yer *Rivers*, 'to look arter her, being alone.' You remember that, Mr. Key? you remember it, miss? You see, I remembered it, too, being, so to speak, alone myself" — he paused, and added in a faint whisper — "till now."

Then he was silent. That innocent lie was the first and last upon his honest lips; for as they stood there, hand in hand, they saw his plain, hard face take upon itself, at first, the gray, ashen hues of the rocks around him, and then and thereafter something of the infinite tranquillity and peace of that wilderness in which he had lived and died, and of which he was a part.

Contemporaneous history was less kindly. The "Bald Top Sentinel" congratulated its readers that the late seismic disturbance was accompanied with very little loss of life, if any. "It is reported that the proprietor of a low shebeen for emigrants in an obscure hollow had succumbed from injuries; but," added the editor, with a fine touch of Western humor, "whether this was the result of his being forcibly mixed up with his own tanglefoot whiskey or not, we are unable to determine from the evidence before us."

For all that, a small stone shaft was added later to the rocks near the site of the old mill, inscribed to the memory of this obscure "proprietor," with the singular legend: "Have ye faith like to him?" And those who knew only of the material catastrophe, looking around upon the scene of desolation it commemorated, thought grimly that it must be faith indeed, and — were wiser than they knew.

• • • • • • • • • •

"You smiled, Don Preble," said the Lady Superior to Key a few weeks later, "when I told you that many caballeros thought it most discreet to intrust their future brides to the maternal guardianship and training of the Holy Church; yet, of a truth, I meant not *you*. And yet — eh! well, we shall see."

THE MYSTERY OF THE HACIENDA

Dick Bracy gazed again at the Hacienda de los Osos, and hesitated. There it lay — its low whitewashed walls looking like a quartz outcrop of the long lazy hillside — unmistakably hot, treeless, and staring broadly in the uninterrupted Californian sunlight. Yet he knew that behind those blistering walls was a reposeful patio, surrounded by low-pitched verandas; that the casa was full of roomy corridors, nooks, and recesses, in which lurked the shadows of a century, and that hidden by the further wall was a lonely old garden, hoary with gnarled pear-trees, and smothered in the spice and dropping leaves of its baking roses. He knew that, although the unwinking sun might glitter on its red tiles, and the unresting trade-winds whistle around its angles, it always kept one unvarying temperature and untroubled calm, as if the dignity of years had triumphed over the changes of ephemeral seasons. But would others see it with his eyes? Would his practical, housekeeping aunt, and his pretty modern cousin —

"Well, what do you say? Speak the word, and you can go into it with your folks to-morrow. And I reckon you won't want to take anything either, for you'll find everything there — just as the old Don left it. I don't want it; the land is good enough for me; I shall have my vaqueros and rancheros to look after the crops and the cattle, and they won't trouble you, for their sheds and barns will be two miles away. You can stay there as long as you like, and go when you choose. You might like to try it for a spell; it's all the same to me. But I should think it the sort of thing a man like you would fancy, and it seems the right thing to have you there. Well, — what shall it be? Is it a go?"

Dick knew that the speaker was sincere. It was an offer perfectly characteristic of his friend, the Western millionaire, who had halted by his side. And he knew also that the slow lifting of his bridle-rein, preparatory to starting forward again, was the business-like gesture of a man who wasted no time even over his acts of impulsive liberality. In another moment he would dismiss the unaccepted offer from his mind — without concern and without resentment.

"Thank you — it is a go," said Dick gratefully.

Nevertheless, when he reached his own little home in the outskirts of San Francisco that night, he was a trifle nervous in confiding to the lady who was at once his aunt and housekeeper the fact that he was now the possessor of a huge mansion in whose patio alone the little eight-roomed villa where they had lived contentedly might be casually dropped. "You see, aunt Viney," he hurriedly explained, "it would have been so ungrateful to have refused him — and it really was an offer as spontaneous as it was liberal. And then, you see, we need occupy only a part of the casa."

"And who will look after the other part?" said aunt Viney grimly. "That will have to be kept tidy, too; and the servants for such a house, where in heaven are they to come from? Or do they go with it?"

"No," said Dick quickly; "the servants left with their old master, when Ringstone bought the property. But we'll find servants enough in the neighborhood — Mexican peons and Indians, you know."

Aunt Viney sniffed. "And you'll have to entertain — if it's a big house. There are all your Spanish neighbors. They'll be gallivanting in and out all the time."

"They won't trouble us," he returned, with some hesitation. "You see, they're furious at the old Don for disposing of his lands to an American, and they won't be likely to look upon the strangers in the new place as anything but interlopers."

"Oh, that is it, is it?" ejaculated aunt Viney, with a slight puckering of her lips. "I thought there was *something*."

"My dear aunt," said Dick, with a sudden illogical heat which he tried to suppress; "I don't know what you mean by 'it' and 'something.' Ringstone's offer was perfectly unselfish; he certainly did not suppose that I would be affected, any more than he would be, by the childish sentimentality of these people over a legitimate, every-day business affair. The old Don made a good bargain, and simply sold the land he could no longer make profitable with his obsolete methods of farming, his gang of idle retainers, and his Noah's Ark machinery, to a man who knew how to use steam reapers, and hired sensible men to work on shares." Nevertheless he was angry with himself for making any explanation, and still more disturbed that he was conscious of a certain feeling that it was necessary.

"I was thinking," said aunt Viney quietly, "that if we invited anybody to stay with us — like Cecily, for example — it might be rather dull for her if we had no neighbors to introduce her to."

Dick started; he had not thought of this. He had been greatly influenced by the belief that his pretty cousin, who was to make them a visit, would like the change and would not miss excitement. "We can always invite some girls down there and make our own company," he answered cheerfully. Nevertheless, he was dimly conscious that he had already made an airy castle of the old hacienda, in which Cecily and her aunt moved *alone*. It was to Cecily that he would introduce the old garden, it was Cecily whom he would accompany through the dark corridors, and with whom he would lounge under the awnings of the veranda. All this innocently, and without prejudice or ulterior thought. He was not yet in love with the pretty cousin whom he had seen but once or twice during the past few years, but it was a possibility not unpleasant to occasionally contemplate. Yet it was equally possible that she might yearn for lighter companionship and accustomed amusement; that the passion-fringed garden and shadow-haunted corridor might be profaned by hoydenish romping and laughter, or by that frivolous flirtation which, in others, he had always regarded as commonplace and vulgar.

Howbeit, at the end of two weeks he found himself regularly installed in the Hacienda de los Osos. His little household, reinforced by his cousin Cecily and three peons picked up at Los Pinos, bore their transplantation with a singular equanimity that seemed to him unaccountable. Then occurred one of those revelations of character with which Nature is always ready to trip up merely human judgment. Aunt Viney, an unrelenting widow of calm but unshaken Dutch prejudices, high but narrow in religious belief, merged without a murmur into the position of chatelaine of this unconventional, half-Latin household. Accepting the situation without exaltation or criticism, placid but unresponsive amidst the youthful enthusiasm of Dick and Cecily over each quaint detail, her influence was nevertheless felt throughout the lingering length and shadowy breadth of the strange old house. The Indian and Mexican servants, at first awed by her practical superiority, succumbed to her half humorous toleration of their incapacity, and became her devoted slaves. Dick was astonished, and even Cecily was confounded. "Do you know," she said confidentially to her cousin, "that when that brown Conchita thought to please aunty by wearing white stockings instead of going round as usual with her cinnamon-colored bare feet in yellow slippers — which I was afraid would be enough to send aunty into conniption fits — she actually told her, very quietly, to take them off, and dress according to her habits and her station? And you remember that in her big, square bedroom there is a praying-stool and a ghastly crucifix, at least three feet long, in ivory and black, quite too human for anything? Well, when I offered to put them in the corridor, she said I 'need n't trouble;' that really she had n't noticed them, and they would do very well where they were. You 'd think she had been accustomed to this sort of thing all her life. It 's just too sweet of her, anyway, even if she 's shamming. And if she *is*, she just does it to the life too, and could give those Spanish women points. Why, she rode en pillion on Manuel's mule, behind him, holding on by his sash, across to the corral yesterday; and you should have seen Manuel absolutely scrape the ground before her with his sombrero when he let her down." Indeed, her tall, erect figure in black lustreless silk, appearing in a heavily shadowed doorway, or seated in a recessed window, gave a new and patrician dignity to the melancholy of the hacienda. It was pleasant to follow this quietly ceremonious shadow gliding along the rose garden at twilight, halting at times to bend stiffly over the bushes, garden-shears in hand, and carrying a little basket filled with withered but still odorous petals, as if she were grimly gathering the faded roses of her youth.

It was also probable that the lively Cecily's appreciation of her aunt might have been based upon another virtue of that lady — namely, her exquisite tact in dealing with the delicate situation evolved from the always possible relations of the two cousins. It was not to be supposed that the servants would fail to invest the young people with Southern romance, and even believe that the situation was prearranged by the aunt with a view to their eventual engagement. To deal with the problem openly, yet without startling the consciousness of either Dick or Cecily; to allow them the privileges of children subject to the occasional restraints of childhood; to find certain household duties for the young girl that kept them naturally apart until certain hours of general relaxation; to calmly ignore the meaning of her retainers' smiles and glances, and yet to good-humoredly accept their interest as a kind of feudal loyalty, was part of aunt Viney's deep diplomacy. Cecily enjoyed her freedom and companionship with Dick, as she enjoyed the novel experiences of the old house, the quaint, faded civilization that it represented, and the change and diversion always acceptable to youth. She did not feel the absence of other girls of her own age; neither was she aware that through this omission she was spared the necessity of a confidante or a rival — both equally revealing to her thoughtless enjoyment. They took their rides together openly and without concealment, relating their adventures afterwards to aunt Viny with a naïveté and frankness that dreamed of no suppression. The city-bred Cecily, accustomed to horse-exercise solely as an ornamental and artificial recreation, felt for the first time the fearful joy of a dash across a league-long plain, with no onlookers but the scattered wild horses she might startle up to scurry before her, or race at her side. Small wonder that, mounted on her fiery little mustang, untrammeled by her short gray riding-habit, free as the wind itself that blew through the folds of her flannel blouse, with her brown hair half loosed beneath her slouched felt hat, she seemed to Dick a more beautiful and womanly figure than the stiff buckramed simulation of man's angularity and precision he had seen in the parks. Perhaps one day she detected this consciousness too plainly in his persistent eyes. Up to that moment she had only watched the glittering stretches of yellow grain, in which occasional wind-shorn evergreen oaks stood mid-leg deep like cattle in water; the distant silhouette of the Sierras against the steely blue; or perhaps the frankly happy face of the good-looking young fellow at her side. But it seemed to her now that an intruder had entered the field — a stranger before whom she was impelled to suddenly fly, half laughingly, half affrightedly — the anxious Dick following wonderingly at her mustang's heels, until she reached the gates of the hacienda, where she fell into a gravity and seriousness that made him wonder still more. He did not dream that his guileless cousin had discovered, with a woman's instinct, a mysterious invader who sought to share their guileless companionship, only to absorb it entirely, and that its name was — love!

The next day she was so greatly preoccupied with her household duties that she could not ride with him. Dick felt unaccountably lost. Perhaps this check to their daily intercourse was no less accelerating to his feelings than the vague motive that induced Cecily to withhold herself. He moped in the corridor; he rode out alone, bullying his mustang in proportion as he missed his cousin's gentle companionship, and circling aimlessly, but still unconsciously, around the hacienda as a centre of attraction. The sun at last was sinking to the accompaniment of a rising wind, which seemed to blow and scatter its broad rays over the shimmering plain until every slight protuberance was burnished into startling brightness; the shadows of the short green oaks grew disproportionally long, and all seemed to point to the white-walled casa. Suddenly he started and instantly reined up.

The figure of a young girl, which he had not before noticed, was slowly moving down the half-shadowed lane made by the two walls of the garden and the corral. Cecily! Perhaps she had come out to meet him. He spurred forward; but as he came nearer he saw that the figure and its attire were surely not hers. He reined up again abruptly, mortified at his disappointment, and a little ashamed lest he should have seemed to have been following an evident stranger. He vaguely remembered, too, that there was a trail to the highroad, through a little swale clothed with myrtle and thorn bush which he had just passed, and that she was probably one of his reserved and secluded neighbors — indeed, her dress, in that uncertain light, looked half Spanish. This was more confusing, since his rashness might have been taken for an attempt to force an acquaintance. He wheeled and galloped towards the front of the casa as the figure disappeared at the angle of the wall.

"I don't suppose you ever see any of our neighbors?" said Dick to his aunt casually.

"I really can't say," returned the lady with quiet equanimity. "There were some extraordinary-looking foreigners on the road to San Gregorio yesterday. Manuel, who was driving me, may have known who they were — he is a kind of Indian Papist himself, you know — but *I* did n't. They might have been relations of his, for all I know."

At any other time Dick would have been amused at this serene relegation of the lofty Estudillos and Peraltas to the caste of the Indian convert, but he was worried to think that perhaps Cecily was really being bored by the absence of neighbors. After dinner, when they sought the rose garden, he dropped upon the little lichen-scarred stone bench by her side. It was still warm from the sun; the hot musk of the roses filled the air; the whole garden, shielded from the cool evening trade-winds by its high walls, still kept the glowing memory of the afternoon sunshine. Aunt Viney, with her garden basket on her arm, moved ghost-like among the distant bushes.

"I hope you are not getting bored here?" he said, after a slight inconsequent pause.

"Does that mean that *you* are?" she returned, raising her mischievous eyes to his.

"No; but I thought you might find it lonely, without neighbors."

"I stayed in to-day," she said, femininely replying to the unasked question, "because I fancied aunt Viney might think it selfish of me to leave her alone so much."

"But *you* are not lonely?"

Certainly not! The young lady was delighted with the whole place, with the quaint old garden, the mysterious corridors, the restful quiet of everything, the picture of dear aunt Viney — who was just the sweetest soul in the world — moving about like the genius of the casa. It was such a change to all her ideas, she would never forget it. It was so thoughtful of him, Dick, to have given them all that pleasure.

"And the rides," continued Dick, with the untactful pertinacity of the average man at such moments — "you are not tired of *them?*"

No; she thought them lovely. Such freedom and freshness in the exercise; so different from riding in the city or at watering-places, where it was one half show, and one was always thinking of one's habit or one's self. One quite forgot one's self on that lovely plain — with everything so far away, and only the mountains to look at in the distance. Nevertheless she did not lift her eyes from the point of the little slipper which had strayed beyond her skirt.

Dick was relieved, but not voluble; he could only admiringly follow the curves of her pretty arms and hands, clasped lightly in her lap, down to the point of the little slipper. But even that charming vanishing point was presently withdrawn —possibly through some instinct, for the young lady had apparently not raised her eyes.

"I'm so glad you like it," said Dick earnestly, yet with a nervous hesitation that made his speech seem artificial to his own ears. "You see I — that is — I had an idea that you might like an occasional change of company. It 's a great pity we 're not on speaking terms with one of these Spanish families. Some of the men, you know, are really fine fellows, with an old-world courtesy that is very charming."

He was surprised to see that she had lifted her head suddenly, with a quick look that, however, changed to an amused and half coquettish smile.

"I am finding no fault with my present company," she said demurely, dropping her head and eyelids until a faint suffusion seemed to follow the falling lashes over her cheek. "I don't think *you* ought to undervalue it."

If he had only spoken then! The hot scent of the roses hung suspended in the air, which seemed to be hushed around them in mute expectancy; the shadows which were hiding aunt Viney from view were also closing round the bench where they sat. He was very near her; he had only to reach out his hand to clasp hers, which lay idly in her lap. He felt himself glowing with a strange emanation; he even fancied that she was turning mechanically towards him, as a flower might turn towards the fervent sunlight. But he could not speak; he could scarcely collect his thoughts, conscious though he was of the absurdity of his silence. What was he waiting for? what did he expect? He was not usually bashful, he was no coward; there was nothing in her attitude to make him hesitate to give expression to what he believed was his first real passion. But he could do nothing. He even fancied that his face, turned towards hers, was stiffening into a vacant smile.

The young girl rose. "I think I heard aunt Viney call me," she said constrainedly, and made a hesitating step forward. The spell which had held Dick seemed to be broken suddenly; he stretched forth his arm to detain her. But the next step appeared to carry her beyond his influence; and it was even with a half movement of rejection that she quickened her pace and disappeared down the path. Dick fell back dejectedly into his seat, yet conscious of a feeling of *relief* that bewildered him.

But only for a moment. A recollection of the chance that he had impotently and unaccountably thrown away returned to him. He tried to laugh, albeit with a glowing cheek, over the momentary bashfulness which he thought had overtaken him, and which must have made him ridiculous in her eyes. He even took a few hesitating steps in the direction of the path where she had disappeared. The sound of voices came to his ear, and the light ring of Cecily's laughter. The color deepened a little on his cheek; he reëntered the house and went to his room.

The red sunset, still faintly showing through the heavily recessed windows to the opposite wall, made two luminous aisles through the darkness of the long, low apartment. From his easy-chair he watched the color drop out of the sky, the yellow plain grow pallid and seem to stretch itself to infinite rest; then a black line began to deepen and creep towards him from the horizon edge; the day was done. It seemed to him a day lost. He had no doubt now but that he loved his cousin, and the opportunity of telling her so — of profiting by her predisposition of the moment — had passed. She would remember herself, she would remember his weak hesitancy, she would despise him. He rose and walked uneasily up and down. And yet — and it disgusted him with himself still more — he was again conscious of the feeling of relief he had before experienced. A vague formula, "It's better as it is," "Who knows what might have come of it?" he found himself repeating, without reason and without resignation.

Ashamed even of his seclusion, he rose to join the little family circle, which now habitually gathered around a table on the veranda of the patio under the rays of a swinging lamp to take their chocolate. To his surprise the veranda was empty and dark; a light shining from the inner drawing-room showed him his aunt in her armchair reading, alone. A slight thrill ran over him: Cecily might be still in the garden! He noiselessly passed the drawing-room door, turned into a long corridor, and slipped through a grating in the wall into the lane that separated it from the garden. The gate was still open; a few paces brought him into the long alley of roses. Their strong perfume — confined in the high, hot walls — at first made him giddy. This was followed by an inexplicable languor; he turned instinctively towards the stone bench and sank upon it. The long rows of calla lilies against the opposite wall looked ghost-like in the darkness, and seemed to have turned their white faces towards him. Then he fancied that *one* had detached itself from the rank and was moving away. He looked again: surely there was something gliding along the wall! A quick tremor of anticipation passed over him. It was Cecily, who had lingered in the garden — perhaps to give him one more opportunity! He rose quickly, and stepped towards the apparition, which had now plainly resolved itself into a slight girlish figure; it slipped on beneath the trees; he followed quickly — his nervous hesitancy had vanished before what now seemed to be a half-coy, half-coquettish evasion of him. He called softly, "Cecily!" but she did not heed him; he quickened his pace — she increased hers. They were both running. She reached the angle of the wall where the gate opened upon the road. Suddenly she stopped, as if intentionally, in the clear open space before it. He could see her distinctly. The lace mantle slipped from her head and shoulders. It was *not* Cecily!

But it was a face so singularly beautiful and winsome that he was as quickly arrested. It was a woman's deep, passionate eyes and heavy hair, joined to a childish oval of cheek and chin, an infantine mouth, and a little nose whose faintly curved outline redeemed the lower face from weakness and brought it into charming harmony with the rest. A yellow rose was pinned in the lustrous black hair above the little ear; a yellow silk shawl or mantle, which had looked white in the shadows, was thrown over one shoulder and twisted twice or thrice around the plump but petite bust. The large black velvety eyes were fixed on his in half wonderment, half amusement; the lovely lips were parted in half astonishment and half a smile. And yet she was like a picture, a dream, — a materialization of one's most fanciful imaginings, — like anything, in fact, but the palpable flesh and blood she evidently was, standing only a few feet before him, whose hurried breath he could see even now heaving her youthful breast.

His own breath appeared suspended, although his heart beat rapidly as he stammered out: "I beg your pardon — I thought" — He stopped at the recollection that this was the *second* time he had followed her.

She did not speak, although her parted lips still curved with their faint coy smile. Then she suddenly lifted her right hand, which had been hanging at her side, clasping some long black object like a stick. Without any apparent impulse from her fingers, the stick slowly seemed to broaden in her little hand into the segment of an opening disk, that, lifting to her face and shoulders, gradually eclipsed the upper part of her figure, until, mounting higher, the beautiful eyes and the yellow rose of her hair alone remained above — a large unfurled fan! Then the long eyelashes drooped, as if in a mute farewell, and they too disappeared as the fan was lifted higher. The half-hidden figure appeared to glide to the gateway, lingered for an instant, and vanished. The astounded Dick stepped quickly into the road, but fan and figure were swallowed up in the darkness.

Amazed and bewildered, he stood for a moment breathless

SHE WAS LIKE A PICTURE

and irresolute. It was no doubt the same stranger that he had seen before. But *who* was she, and what was she doing there? If she were one of their Spanish neighbors, drawn simply by curiosity to become a trespasser, why had she lingered to invite a scrutiny that would clearly identify her? It was not the escapade of that giddy girl which the lower part of her face had suggested, for such a one would have giggled and instantly flown; it was not the deliberate act of a grave woman of the world, for its sequel was so purposeless. Why had she revealed herself to *him* alone? Dick felt himself glowing with a half-shamed, half-secret pleasure. Then he remembered Cecily, and his own purpose in coming into the garden. He hurriedly made a tour of the walks and shrubbery, ostentatiously calling her, yet seeing, as in a dream, only the beautiful eyes of the stranger still before him, and conscious of an ill-defined remorse and disloyalty he had never known before. But Cecily was not there; and again he experienced the old sensation of relief!

He shut the garden gate, crossed the road, and found the grille just closing behind a slim white figure. He started, for it was Cecily; but even in his surprise he was conscious of wondering how he could have ever mistaken the stranger for her. She appeared startled too; she looked pale and abstracted. Could she have been a witness of his strange interview?

Her first sentence dispelled the idea.

"I suppose you were in the garden?" she said, with a certain timidity. "I did n't go there — it seemed so close and stuffy — but walked a little down the lane."

A moment before he would have eagerly told her his adventure; but in the presence of her manifest embarrassment his own increased. He concluded to tell her another time. He murmured vaguely that he had been looking for her in the garden, yet he had a flushing sense of falsehood in his reserve; and they passed silently along the corridor and entered the patio together. She lit the hanging lamp mechanically. She certainly *was* pale; her slim hand trembled slightly. Suddenly her eyes met his, a faint color came into her cheek, and she smiled. She put up her hand with a girlish gesture towards the back of her head.

"What are you looking at? Is my hair coming down?"

"No," hesitated Dick, "but — I — thought — you were looking just a *little* pale."

An aggressive ray slipped into her blue eyes.

"Strange! I thought *you* were. Just now at the grille you looked as if the roses had n't agreed with you."

They both laughed, a little nervously, and Conchita brought the chocolate. When aunt Viney came from the drawing-room she found the two young people together, and Cecily in a gale of high spirits.

She had had *such* a wonderfully interesting walk, all by herself, alone on the plain. It was really so queer and elfish to find one's self where one could see nothing above or around one anywhere but stars. Stars above one, to right and left of one, and some so low down they seemed as if they were picketed on the plain. It was so odd to find the horizon line at one's very feet, like a castaway at sea. And the wind! it seemed to move one this way and that way, for one could not see anything, and might really be floating in the air. Only once she thought she saw something, and was quite frightened.

"What was it?" asked Dick quickly.

"Well, it was a large black object; but — it turned out only to be a horse."

She laughed, although she had evidently noticed her cousin's eagerness, and her own eyes had a nervous brightness.

"And where was Dick all this while?" asked aunt Viney quietly.

Cecily interrupted, and answered for him briskly. "Oh, he was trying to make attar of rose of himself in the garden. He's still stupefied by his own sweetness."

"If this means," said aunt Viney, with matter-of-fact precision, "that you've been gallivanting all alone, Cecily, on that common plain, where you're likely to meet all sorts of foreigners and tramps and savages, and Heaven knows what other vermin, I shall set my face against a repetition of it. If you *must* go out, and Dick can't go with you — and I must say that even you and he going out together there at night is n't exactly the kind of American Christian example to set to our neighbors — you had better get Concepcion to go with you and take a lantern."

"But there is nobody one meets on the plain — at least, nobody likely to harm one," protested Cecily.

"Don't tell *me*," said aunt Viney decidedly; "have n't I seen all sorts of queer figures creeping along by the brink after nightfall between San Gregorio and the next rancho? Are n't they always skulking backwards and forwards to mass and aguardiente?"

"And I don't know why *we* should set any example to our neighbors. We don't see much of them, or they of us."

"Of course not," returned aunt Viney; "because all proper Spanish young ladies are shut up behind their grilles at night. You don't see *them* traipsing over the plain in the darkness, *with* or *without* cavaliers! Why, Don Rafael would lock one of *his* sisters up in a convent and consider her disgraced forever, if he heard of it."

Dick felt his cheeks burning; Cecily slightly paled. Yet both said eagerly together, "Why, what do *you* know about it, aunty?"

"A great deal," returned aunt Viney quietly, holding her tatting up to the light and examining the stitches with a critical eye. "I've got my eyes about me, thank Heaven! even if my ears don't understand the language. And there's a great deal, my dears, that you young people might learn from these Papists."

"And do you mean to say," continued Dick, with a glowing cheek and an uneasy smile, "that Spanish girls don't go out alone?"

"No young *lady* goes out without her duenna," said aunt Viney emphatically. "Of course there's the Concha variety, that go out without even stockings."

As the conversation flagged after this, and the young people once or twice yawned nervously, aunt Viney thought they had better go to bed.

But Dick did not sleep. The beautiful face beamed out again from the darkness of his room; the light that glimmered through his deep-set curtainless windows had an odd trick of bringing out certain hanging articles, or pieces of furniture, into a resemblance to a mantled figure. The deep, velvety eyes, fringed with long brown lashes, again looked into his with amused, childlike curiosity. He scouted the harsh criticisms of aunt Viney, even while he shrank from proving to her her mistake in the quality of his mysterious visitant. Of course she was a lady — far superior to any of her race whom he had yet met. Yet how should he find *who* she was? His pride and a certain chivalry forbade his questioning the servants — before whom it was the rule of the household to avoid all reference to their neighbors. He would make the acquaintance of the old padre — perhaps *he* might talk. He would ride early along the trail in the direction of the nearest rancho, — Don José Amador's, — a thing he had hitherto studiously refrained from doing. It was three miles away. She must have come that distance, but not *alone*. Doubtless she had kept her duenna in waiting in the road. Perhaps it was she who had frightened Cecily. Had Cecily told *all* she had seen? Her embarrassed manner certainly suggested more than she had told. He felt himself turning hot with an indefinite uneasiness. Then he tried to compose himself. After all, it was a thing of the past.

The fair unknown had bribed the duenna for once, no doubt — had satisfied her girlish curiosity — she would not come again! But this thought brought with it such a sudden sense of utter desolation, a deprivation so new and startling, that it frightened him. Was his head turned by the witcheries of some black-eyed schoolgirl whom he had seen but once? Or — he felt his cheeks glowing in the darkness — was it really a case of love at first sight, and she herself had been impelled by the same yearning that now possessed him? A delicious satisfaction followed, that left a smile on his lips as if it had been a kiss. He knew now why he had so strangely hesitated with Cecily. He had never really loved her — he had never known what love was till now!

He was up early the next morning, skimming the plain on the back of Chu Chu, before the hacienda was stirring. He did not want any one to suspect his destination, and it was even with a sense of guilt that he dashed along the swale in the direction of the Amador rancho. A few vaqueros, an old Digger squaw carrying a basket, two little Indian acolytes on their way to mass passed him. He was surprised to find that there were no ruts of carriage wheels within three miles of the casa, and evidently no track for carriages through the swale. *She* must have come on horseback! A broader highway, however, intersected the trail at a point where the low walls of the Amador rancho came in view. Here he was startled by the apparition of an old-fashioned family carriage drawn by two large piebald horses. But it was unfortunately closed. Then, with a desperate audacity new to his reserved nature, he ranged close beside it, and even stared in the windows. A heavily mantled old woman, whose brown face was in high contrast to her snow-white hair, sat in the back seat. Beside her was a younger companion, with the odd blond hair and blue eyes sometimes seen in the higher Castilian type. For an instant the blue eyes caught his, half-coquettishly. But the girl was *not* at all like his mysterious visitor, and he fell, discomfited, behind.

He had determined to explain his trespass on the grounds of his neighbor, if questioned, by the excuse that he was hunting a strayed mustang. But his presence, although watched with a cold reserve by the few peons who were lounging near the gateway, provoked no challenge from them; and he made a circuit of the low adobe walls, with their barred windows and cinnamon-tiled roofs, without molestation — but equally without satisfaction. He felt he was a fool for imagining that he would see her in that way. He turned his horse towards the little mission half a mile away. There he had once met the old padre, who spoke a picturesque but limited English; now he was only a few yards ahead of him, just turning into the church. The padre was pleased to see Don Ricardo; it was an unusual thing for the Americanos, he observed, to be up so early: for himself, he had his functions, of course. No, the ladies that the caballero had seen had not been to mass! They were Doña Maria and her daughter, going to San Gregorio. They comprised *all* the family at the rancho, — there were none others, unless the caballero, of a possibility, meant Doña Inez, a maiden aunt of sixty, — an admirable woman, a saint on earth! He trusted that he would find his estray; there was no doubt a mark upon it, otherwise the plain was illimitable; there were many horses — the world was wide!

Dick turned his face homewards a little less adventurously, and it must be confessed, with a growing sense of his folly. The keen, dry morning air brushed away his fancies of the preceding night; the beautiful eyes that had lured him thither seemed to flicker and be blown out by its practical breath. He began to think remorsefully of his cousin, of his aunt, — of his treachery to that reserve which the little alien household had maintained towards their Spanish neighbors. He found aunt Viney and Cecily at breakfast — Cecily, he thought, looking a trifle pale. Yet (or was it only his fancy ?) she seemed curious about his morning ride. And he became more reticent.

"You must see a good many of our neighbors when you are out so early ?"

"Why ?" he asked shortly, feeling his color rise.

"Oh, because — because we don't see them at any other time."

"I saw a very nice chap — I think the best of the lot," he began, with assumed jocularity; then, seeing Cecily's eyes suddenly fixed on him, he added, somewhat lamely, "the padre! There were also two women in a queer coach."

"Doña Maria Amador, and Doña Felipa Peralte — her daughter by her first husband," said aunt Viney quietly. "When you see the horses you think it 's a circus; when you look inside the carriage you *know* it 's a funeral."

Aunt Viney did not condescend to explain how she had acquired her genealogical knowledge of her neighbor's family, but succeeded in breaking the restraint between the young people. Dick proposed a ride in the afternoon, which was cheerfully accepted by Cecily. Their intercourse apparently recovered its old frankness and freedom, marred only for a moment when they set out on the plain. Dick, really to forget his preoccupation of the morning, turned his horse's head *away* from the trail, to ride in another direction; but Cecily oddly, and with an exhibition of caprice quite new to her, insisted upon taking the old trail. Nevertheless they met nothing, and soon became absorbed in the exercise. Dick felt something of his old tenderness return to this wholesome, pretty girl at his side; perhaps he betrayed it in his voice, or in an unconscious lingering by her bridle-rein, but she accepted it with a naïve reserve which he naturally attributed to the effect of his own previous preoccupation. He bore it so gently, however, that it awakened her interest, and, possibly, her pique. Her reserve relaxed, and by the time they returned to the hacienda they had regained something of their former intimacy. The dry, incisive breath of the plains swept away the last lingering remnants of yesterday's illusions. Under this frankly open sky, in this clear perspective of the remote Sierras, which admitted no fanciful deception of form or distance — there remained nothing but a strange incident — to be later explained or forgotten. Only he could not bring himself to talk to *her* about it.

After dinner, and a decent lingering for coffee on the veranda, Dick rose, and leaning half caressingly, half mischievously, over his aunt's rocking-chair, but with his eyes on Cecily, said: —

"I've been deeply considering, dear aunty, what you said last evening of the necessity of our offering a good example to our neighbors. Now, although Cecily and I are cousins, yet, as I am *head* of the house, lord of the manor, and patron, according to the Spanish ideas I am her recognized guardian and protector, and it seems to me it is my positive *duty* to accompany her if she wishes to walk out this evening."

A momentary embarrassment — which, however, changed quickly into an answering smile to her cousin — came over Cecily's face. She turned to her aunt.

"Well, don't go too far," said that lady quietly.

When they closed the grille behind them and stepped into the lane, Cecily shot a quick glance at her cousin.

"Perhaps you'd rather walk in the garden?"

"I? Oh, no," he answered honestly. "But" — he hesitated — "would you?"

"Yes," she said faintly.

He impulsively offered his arm; her slim hand slipped lightly through it and rested on his sleeve. They crossed the lane together, and entered the garden. A load appeared to be lifted from his heart; the moment seemed propitious, — here was a chance to recover his lost ground, to regain his self-respect and perhaps his cousin's affection. By a common instinct, however, they turned to the right, and *away* from the stone bench, and walked slowly down the broad allée.

They talked naturally and confidingly of the days when they had met before, of old friends they had known and changes that had crept into their young lives; they spoke affectionately of the grim, lonely, but self-contained old woman they had just left, who had brought them thus again together. Cecily talked of Dick's studies, of the scientific work on which he was engaged, that was to bring him, she was sure, fame and fortune! They talked of the thoughtful charm of the old house, of its quaint old-world flavor. They spoke of the beauty of the night, the flowers and the stars, in whispers, as one is apt to do — as fearing to disturb a supersensitiveness in nature.

They had come out later than on the previous night; and the moon, already risen above the high walls of the garden, seemed a vast silver shield caught in the interlacing tops of the old pear-trees, whose branches crossed its bright field like dark bends or bars. As it rose higher, it began to separate the lighter shrubbery, and open white lanes through the olive-trees. Damp currents of air, alternating with drier heats, on what appeared to be different levels, moved across the whole garden, or gave way at times to a breathless lull and hush of everything, in which the long rose alley seemed to be swooning in its own spices. They had reached the bottom of the garden, and had turned, facing the upper moonlit extremity and the bare stone bench. Cecily's voice faltered, her hand leaned more heavily on his arm, as if she were overcome by the strong perfume. His right hand began to steal towards hers. But she had stopped; she was trembling.

"Go on," she said in a half whisper. "Leave me a moment; I'll join you afterwards."

"You are ill, Cecily! It's those infernal flowers!" said Dick earnestly. "Let me help you to the bench."

"No — it's nothing. Go on, please. Do! Will you go?"

She spoke with imperiousness, unlike herself. He walked on mechanically a dozen paces, and turned. She had disappeared. He remembered there was a smaller gate opening upon the plain near where they had stopped. Perhaps she had passed through that. He continued on, slowly, towards the upper end of the garden, occasionally turning to await her return. In this way he gradually approached the stone bench. He was facing about to continue his walk, when his heart seemed to stop beating. The beautiful visitor of last night was sitting alone on the bench before him!

She had not been there a moment before; he could have sworn it. Yet there was no illusion now of shade or distance. She was scarcely six feet from him, in the bright moonlight. The whole of her exquisite little figure was visible, from her lustrous hair down to the tiny, black satin, low-quartered slipper, held as by two toes. Her face was fully revealed; he could see even the few minute freckles, like powdered allspice, that heightened the pale satin sheen of her beautifully rounded cheek; he could detect even the moist shining of her parted red lips, the white outlines of her little teeth, the length of her curved lashes, and the meshes of the black lace veil that fell from the yellow rose above her ear to the black silk camisa; he noted even the thick yellow satin saya, or skirt, heavily flounced with black lace and bugles, and that it was a different dress from that worn on the preceding night, a half-gala costume, carried with the indescribable air of a woman looking her best and pleased to do so: all this he had noted, drawing nearer and nearer, until near enough to forget it all and drown himself in the depths of her beautiful eyes. For they were no longer childlike and wondering: they were glowing with expectancy, anticipation — love!

He threw himself passionately on the bench beside her. Yet, even if he had known her language, he could not have spoken. She leaned towards him; their eyes seemed to meet caressingly, as in an embrace. Her little hand slipped from the yellow folds of her skirt to the bench. He eagerly seized it. A subtle thrill ran through his whole frame. There was no delusion here; it was flesh and blood, warm, quivering, and even tightening round his own. He was about to carry it to his lips, when she rose and stepped backwards. He pressed eagerly forward. Another backward step brought her to the pear-tree, where she seemed to plunge into its shadow. Dick Bracy followed — and the same shadow seemed to fold them in its embrace.

. . . .

He did not return to the veranda and chocolate that evening, but sent word from his room that he had retired, not feeling well.

Cecily, herself a little nervously exalted, corroborated the fact of his indisposition by telling aunt Viney that the close odors of the rose garden had affected them both. Indeed, she had been obliged to leave before him. Perhaps in waiting for her return — and she really was not well enough to go back — he was exposed to the night air too long. She was very sorry.

Aunt Viney heard this with a slight contraction of her brows and a renewed scrutiny of her knitting; and, having satisfied herself by a personal visit to Dick's room that he was not alarmingly ill, set herself to find out what was really the matter with the young people; for there was no doubt that Cecily was in some vague way as disturbed and preoccupied as Dick. He rode out again early the next morning, returning to his studies in the library directly after breakfast; and Cecily was equally reticent, except when, to aunt Viney's perplexity, she found excuses for Dick's manner on the ground of his absorption in his work, and that he was probably being bored by want of society. She proposed that she should ask an old schoolfellow to visit them.

"It would give Dick a change of ideas, and he would not be perpetually obliged to look so closely after me." She blushed slightly under aunt Viney's gaze, and added hastily, "I mean, of course, he would not feel it his *duty*."

She even induced her aunt to drive with her to the old mission church, where she displayed a pretty vivacity and interest in the people they met, particularly a few youthful and picturesque caballeros. Aunt Viney smiled gravely. Was the poor child developing an unlooked-for coquetry, or preparing to make the absent-minded Dick jealous? Well, the idea was not a bad one. In the evening she astonished the two cousins by offering to accompany them into the garden — a suggestion accepted with eager and effusive politeness by each, but carried out with great awkwardness by the distrait young people later. Aunt Viney clearly saw that it was not her *presence* that was required. In this way two or three days elapsed without apparently bringing the relations of Dick and Cecily to any more satisfactory conclusion. The diplomatic aunt Viney confessed herself puzzled.

One night it was very warm; the usual trade-winds had died away before sunset, leaving an unwonted hush in sky and plain. There was something so portentous in this sudden withdrawal of that rude stimulus to the otherwise monotonous level, that a recurrence of such phenomena was always known as "earthquake weather." The wild cattle moved uneasily in the distance without feeding; herds of unbroken mustangs approached the confines of the hacienda in vague timorous squads. The silence and stagnation of the old house was oppressive, as if the life had really gone out of it at last; and aunt Viney, after waiting impatiently for the young people to come in to chocolate, rose grimly, set her lips together, and went out into the lane. The gate of the rose garden opposite was open. She walked determinedly forward and entered.

In that doubly stagnant air the odor of the roses was so suffocating and overpowering that she had to stop to take breath. The whole garden, except a near cluster of pear-trees, was brightly illuminated by the moonlight. No one was to be seen along the length of the broad allée, strewn an inch deep with scattered red and yellow petals — colorless in the moonbeams. She was turning away, when Dick's familiar voice, but with a strange accent of entreaty in it, broke the silence. It seemed to her vaguely to come from within the pear-tree shadow.

"But we must understand one another, my darling! Tell me all. This suspense, this mystery, this brief moment of happiness, and these hours of parting and torment, are killing me!"

A slight cough broke from aunt Viney. She had heard enough — she did not wish to hear more. The mystery was explained. Dick loved Cecily; the coyness or hesitation was not on *his* part. Some idiotic girlish caprice, quite inconsistent with what she had noticed at the mission church, was keeping Cecily silent, reserved, and exasperating to her lover. She would have a talk with the young lady, without revealing the fact that she had overheard them. She was perhaps a little hurt that affairs should have reached this point without some show of confidence to her from the young people. Dick might naturally be reticent — but Cecily!

She did not even look towards the pear-tree, but turned and walked stiffly out of the gate. As she was crossing the lane she suddenly started back in utter dismay and consternation! For Cecily, her niece, — in her own proper person, — was actually just coming *out of the house!*

Aunt Viney caught her wrist. "Where have you been?" she asked quickly.

"In the house," stammered Cecily, with a frightened face.

"You have not been in the garden with Dick?" continued aunt Viney sharply — yet with a hopeless sense of the impossibility of the suggestion.

"No, I was not even going there. I thought of just strolling down the lane."

The girl's accents were truthful; more than that, she absolutely looked relieved by her aunt's question. "Do you want me, aunty?" she added quickly.

"Yes — no. Run away, then — but don't go far."

At any other time aunt Viney might have wondered at the eagerness with which Cecily tripped away; now she was only anxious to get rid of her. She entered the casa hurriedly.

"Send Josefa to me at once," she said to Manuel.

Josefa, the housekeeper, — a fat Mexican woman, — appeared. "Send Concha and the other maids here," They appeared, mutely wondering. Aunt Viney glanced hurriedly over them — they were all there — a few comely, but not *too* attractive, and all stupidly complacent. "Have you girls any friends here this evening — or are you expecting any?" she demanded. Of a surety, no! — as the patrona knew — it was not night for church. "Very well," returned aunt Viney; "I thought I heard your voices in the garden; understand, I want no gallivanting there. Go to bed."

She was relieved! Dick certainly was not guilty of a low intrigue with one of the maids. But who and what was she ?

Dick was absent again from chocolate ; there was unfinished work to do. Cecily came in later, just as aunt Viney was beginning to be anxious. Had she appeared distressed or piqued by her cousin's conduct, aunt Viney might have spoken ; but there was a pretty color on her cheek — the result, she said, of her rapid walking, and the fresh air ; did aunt Viney know that a cool breeze had just risen ? — and her delicate lips were wreathed at times in a faint retrospective smile. Aunt Viney stared ; certainly the girl was not pining ! What young people were made of nowadays she really could n't conceive. She shrugged her shoulders and resumed her tatting.

Nevertheless, as Dick's unfinished studies seemed to have whitened his cheek and impaired his appetite the next morning, she announced her intention of driving out towards the mission alone. When she returned at luncheon she further astonished the young people by casually informing them they would have Spanish visitors to dinner — namely, their neighbors, Doña Maria Amador and the Doña Felipa Peralta.

Both faces were turned eagerly towards her ; both said almost in the same breath, " But, aunt Viney ! you don't know them ! However did you — What does it all mean ? "

" My dears," said aunt Viney placidly, " Mrs. Amador and I have always nodded to each other, and I knew they were only waiting for the slightest encouragement. I gave it, and they 're coming."

It was difficult to say whether Cecily's or Dick's face betrayed the greater delight and animation. Aunt Viney looked from the one to the other. It seemed as if her attempt at diversion had been successful.

" Tell us all about it, you dear, clever, artful aunty ! " said Cecily gayly.

"There 's nothing whatever to tell, my love! It seems, however, that the young one, Doña Felipa, has seen Dick, and remembers him." She shot a keen glance at Dick, but was obliged to admit that the rascal's face remained unchanged. "And I wanted to bring a cavalier for *you*, dear, but Don José's nephew is n't at home now." Yet here, to her surprise, Cecily was faintly blushing.

Early in the afternoon the piebald horses and dark brown chariot of the Amadors drew up before the gateway. The young people were delighted with Doña Felipa, and thought her blue eyes and tawny hair gave an added piquancy to her colorless satin skin and otherwise distinctively Spanish face and figure. Aunt Viney, who entertained Doña Maria, was nevertheless watchful of the others, but failed to detect in Dick's effusive greeting, or the Doña's coquettish smile of recognition, any suggestion of previous confidences. It was rather to Cecily that Doña Felipa seemed to be characteristically exuberant and childishly feminine. Both mother and stepdaughter spoke a musical infantine English, which the daughter supplemented with her eyes, her eyebrows, her little brown fingers, her plump shoulders, a dozen charming intonations of voice, and a complete vocabulary in her active and emphatic fan.

The young lady went over the house with Cecily curiously, as if recalling some old memories. "Ah, yes, I remember it — but it was long ago and I was very leetle — you comprehend, and I have not arrive mooch when the old Don was alone. It was too — too — what you call melankoly. And the old man have not make mooch to himself of company."

"Then there were no young people in the house, I suppose?" said Cecily, smiling.

"No — not since the old man's father lif. Then there were *two*. It is a good number, this two, eh?" She gave a single gesture, which took in, with Cecily, the distant

Dick, and with a whole volume of suggestion in her shoulders, and twirling fan, continued: "Ah! two sometime make *one* — is it not? But not *then* in the old time — ah, no! It is a sad story. I shall tell it to you some time, but not to *him*."

But Cecily's face betrayed no undue bashful consciousness, and she only asked, with a quiet smile, "Why not to — to my cousin?"

"Imbécile!" responded that lively young lady.

After dinner the young people proposed to take Doña Felipa into the rose garden, while aunt Viney entertained Doña Maria on the veranda. The young girl threw up her hands with an affectation of horror. "Santa Maria! — in the rose garden? After the Angelus, you and him? Have you not heard?"

But here Doña Maria interposed. Ah! Santa Maria! What was all that! Was it not enough to talk old woman's gossip and tell vaqueros' tales at home, without making uneasy the strangers? She would have none of it. "Vamos!"

Nevertheless Doña Felipa overcame her horror of the rose garden at infelicitous hours so far as to permit herself to be conducted by the cousins into it, and to be installed like a rose queen on the stone bench, while Dick and Cecily threw themselves in submissive and imploring attitudes at her little feet. The young girl looked mischievously from one to the other.

"It ees very pret-ty, but all the same I am not a rose: I am what you call a big gooseberry! Eh — is it not?"

The cousins laughed, but without any embarrassed consciousness. "Doña Felipa knows a sad story of this house," said Cecily; "but she will not tell it before you, Dick."

Dick, looking up at the coquettish little figure, with Heaven knows what *other* memories in his mind, implored and protested.

"Ah! but this little story — she ees not so mooch sad of herself as she ees str-r-r-ange!" She gave an exaggerated little shiver under her lace shawl, and closed her eyes meditatively.

"Go on," said Dick, smiling in spite of his interested expectation.

Doña Felipa took her fan in both hands, spanning her knees, leaned forward, and after a preliminary compressing of her lips and knitting of her brows, said: —

"It was a long time ago. Don Gregorio he have his daughter Rosita here, and for her he will fill all thees rose garden and gif to her; for she like mooch to lif with the rose. She ees very pret-ty. You shall have seen her picture here in the casa. No? It have hang under the crucifix in the corner room, turn around to the wall — *why*, you shall comprehend when I have made finish thees story. Comes to them here one day Don Vincente, Don Gregorio's nephew, to lif when his father die. He was young, a pollio — same as Rosita. They were mooch together; they have make lofe. What will you? It ees always the same. The Don Gregorio have comprehend; the friends have all comprehend: in a year they will make marry. Doña Rosita she go to Monterey to see his family. There ees an English warship come there; and Rosita she ees very gay with the officers, and make the flirtation very mooch. Then Don Vincente he is onhappy, and he revenge himself to make lofe with another. When Rosita come back it is very miserable for them both, but they say nossing. The warship he have gone away; the other girl Vincente he go not to no more. All the same, Rosita and Vincente are very triste, and the family will not know what to make. Then Rosita she is sick and eat nossing, and walk to herself all day in the rose garden, until she is as white and fade away as the rose. And Vincente he eat nossing, but drink mooch aguardiente. Then he have fever and go dead. And Rosita she have fainting and fits; and one day they have look for her in the rose garden, and she is not! And they poosh and poosh in the ground for her, and they find her with so mooch rose-leaves — so deep — on top of her. *She* has go dead. It is a very sad story, and when you hear it you are very, very mooch dissatisfied."

It is to be feared that the two Americans were not as thrilled by this sad recital as the fair narrator had expected, and even Dick ventured to point out that that sort of thing happened also to his countrymen, and was not peculiar to the casa.

"But you said that there was a terrible sequel," suggested Cecily smilingly; "tell us *that*. Perhaps Mr. Bracy may receive it a little more politely."

An expression of superstitious gravity, half real, half simulated, came over Doña Felipa's face, although her vivacity of gesticulation and emphasis did not relax. She cast a hurried glance around her, and leaned a little forward towards the cousins.

"When there are no more young people in the casa because they are dead," she continued, in a lower voice, "Don Gregorio he is very melank-oaly, and he have no more company for many years. Then there was a rodeo near the hacienda, and there came five or six caballeros to stay with him for the feast. Notabilimente comes then Don Jorge Martinez. He is a bad man — so weeked — a Don Juan for making lofe to the ladies. He lounge in the garden, he smoke his cigarette, he twist the mustache — so! One day he came in, and he laugh and wink so and say, 'Oh, the weeked, sly Don Gregorio! He have hid away in the casa a beautiful, pret-ty girl, and he will nossing say.' And the other caballeros say, 'Mira! what is this? there is not so mooch as one young lady in the casa.' And Don Jorge he wink, and he say, 'Imbeciles! pigs!' And he walk in the garden and twist his mustache more than ever. And one day, behold! he walk into the casa, very white and angry, and he swear mooch to himself; and he orders his horse, and he ride away, and never come back no more, never-r-r! And one day another caballero, Don Esteban Briones, he came in, and say, 'Hola! Don Jorge has forgotten his pret-ty girl: he have left her over on the garden bench. Truly I have seen.' And they say, 'We will too.' And they go, and there is nossing. And they say, 'Imbecile and pig!' But he is not imbecile and pig; for he has seen, and Don Jorge has seen; and why? For it is not a girl, but what you call her — a ghost! And they will that Don Esteban should make a picture of her — a design; and he make one. And old Don Gregorio he say, 'Madre de Dios! it is Rosita' — the same that hung under the crucifix in the big room."

"And is that all?" asked Dick, with a somewhat pronounced laugh, but a face that looked quite white in the moonlight.

"No, it ees *not* all. For when Don Gregorio got himself more company another time — it ees all yonge ladies, and my aunt she is invite too; for she was yonge then, and she herself have tell to me this: —

"One night she is in the garden with the other girls, and when they want to go in the casa one have say, 'Where is Francisca Pacheco? Look, she came here with us, and now she is not.' Another one say, 'She have conceal herself to make us affright.' And my aunt she say, 'I will go seek that I shall find her.' And she go. And when she came to the pear-tree, she heard Francisca's voice, and it say to some one she see not, 'Fly! vamos! Some one have come.' And then she come at the moment upon Francisca very white and trembling, and — alone. And Francisca she have run away and say nossing, and shut herself in her room. And one of the other girls say: 'It is the handsome caballero with the little black mustache and sad white face that I have seen in the garden that make this. It is truly that he is some poor relation of Don Gregorio, or some mad kinsman that he will not we should know.' And my aunt ask Don Gregorio, for she is yonge. And he have say: 'What silly fool ees thees? There is not one caballero here, but myself.' And when the other young girl have tell to him how the caballero look, he say: 'The saints save us! I cannot more say. It ees Don Vincente, who haf gone dead.' And he cross himself, and — But look ! Madre de Dios! — Mees Cecily, you are ill — you are affrighted. I am a gabbling fool! Help her, Don Ricardo; she is falling!"

But it was too late: Cecily had tried to rise to her feet, had staggered forward, and fallen in a faint on the bench.

. . . .

Dick did not remember how he helped to carry the insensible Cecily to the casa, nor what explanation he had given to the alarmed inmates of her sudden attack. He recalled vaguely that something had been said of the overpowering perfumes of the garden at that hour, that the lively Felipa had become half hysterical in her remorseful apologies, and that aunt Viney had ended the scene by carrying Cecily into her own room, where she presently recovered a still trembling but reticent consciousness. But the fainting of his cousin and the presence of a real emergency had diverted his imagination from the vague terror that had taken possession of it, and for the moment enabled him to control himself. With a desperate effort he managed to keep up a show of hospitable civility to his Spanish friends until their early departure. Then he hurried to his own room. So bewildered and horrified he had become, and a prey to such superstitious terrors, that he could not at that moment bring himself to the test of looking for the picture of the alleged Rosita, which might still be hanging in his aunt's room. If it were really the face of his mysterious visitant, — in his present terror — he felt that his reason might not stand the shock. He would look at it to-morrow, when he was calmer! Until then he would believe that the story was some strange coincidence with what must have been his hallucination, or a vulgar trick to which he had fallen a credulous victim. Until then he would believe that Cecily's fright had been only the effect of Doña Felipa's story, acting upon a vivid imagination, and not a terrible confirmation of something she had herself seen. He threw himself, without undressing, upon his bed, in a benumbing agony of doubt.

The gentle opening of his door and the slight rustle of a skirt started him to his feet with a feeling of new and overpowering repulsion. But it was a familiar figure that he saw in the long aisle of light which led from his recessed window, whose face was white enough to have been a spirit's, and whose finger was laid upon its pale lips, as it softly closed the door behind it.

"Cecily!"

"Hush!" she said, in a distracted whisper; "I felt I must see you to-night. I could not wait until day — no, not another hour! I could not speak to you before them. I could not go into that dreadful garden again, or beyond the walls of this house. Dick, I want to — I *must* tell you something! I would have kept it from every one — from you most of all! I know you will hate me, and despise me; but, Dick, listen!" — she caught his hand despairingly, drawing it towards her — "that girl's awful story was *true!*" She threw his hand away.

"And you have seen *her!*" said Dick frantically. "Good God!"

The young girl's manner changed. "*Her!*" she said, half scornfully; "you don't suppose I believe *that* story? No. I — I — don't blame me, Dick, — I have seen *him.*"

"Him?"

She pushed him nervously into a seat, and sat down beside him. In the half-light of the moon, despite her pallor and distraction, she was still very human, womanly, and attractive in her disorder.

"Listen to me, Dick. Do you remember one afternoon, when we were riding together, I got ahead of you, and dashed off to the casa. I don't know what possessed me, or *why* I did it. I only know I wanted to get home quickly, and get away from you. No, I was not angry, Dick, at *you*; it did not seem to be *that*; I — well, I confess I was *frightened* — at something, I don't know what. When I wheeled round into the lane, I saw — a man — a young gentleman standing by the garden-wall. He was very picturesque-looking, in his red sash, velvet jacket, and round silver buttons; handsome, but, oh, so pale and sad! He looked at me very eagerly, and then suddenly drew back, and I heard you on Chu Chu coming at my heels. You must have seen him and passed him too, I thought; but when you said nothing of it, I — I don't know why, Dick, I said nothing of it too. Don't speak!" she added, with a hurried gesture; "I know *now* why you said nothing, — *you* had not seen him."

She stopped, and put back a wisp of her disordered chestnut hair.

"The next time was the night *you* were so queer, Dick, sitting on that stone bench. When I left you — I thought you did n't care to have me stay — I went to seek aunt Viney at the bottom of the garden. I was very sad, but suddenly I found myself very gay, talking and laughing with her in a way I could not account for. All at once, looking up, I saw *him* standing by the little gate, looking at me very sadly. I think I would have spoken to aunt Viney, but he put his finger to his lips — his hand was so slim and white, quite like a hand in one of those Spanish pictures — and moved slowly backwards into the lane, as if he wished to speak with *me* only — out there. I know I ought to have spoken to aunty; I knew it was wrong what I did, but he looked so earnest, so appealing, so awfully sad, Dick, that I slipped past aunty and went out of the gate. Just then she missed me, and called. He made a kind of despairing gesture, raising his hand Spanish fashion to his lips, as if to say good-night. You 'll think me bold, Dick, but I was so anxious to know what it all meant, that I gave a glance behind to see if aunty was following, before I should go right up to him and demand an explanation. But when I faced round again, he was gone! I walked up and down the lane and out on the plain nearly half an hour, seeking him. It was strange, I know; but I was not a bit *frightened*, Dick — that was so queer — but I was only amazed and curious."

The look of spiritual terror in Dick's face here seemed to give way to a less exalted disturbance, as he fixed his eyes on Cecily's.

"You remember I met *you* coming in: you seemed so queer then that I did not say anything to you, for I thought you would laugh at me, or reproach me for my boldness; and I thought, Dick, that — that — that — this person wished to speak only to *me*." She hesitated.

"Go on," said Dick, in a voice that had also undergone a singular change.

The chestnut head was bent a little lower, as the young girl nervously twisted her fingers in her lap.

"Then I saw him again—and—again," she went on hesitatingly. "Of course I spoke to him, to — to — find out what he wanted; but you know, Dick, I cannot speak Spanish, and of course he didn't understand me, and didn't reply."

"But his manner, his appearance, gave you some idea of his meaning?" said Dick suddenly.

Cecily's head drooped a little lower. "I thought — that is, I fancied I knew what he meant."

"No doubt," said Dick, in a voice which, but for the superstitious horror of the situation, might have impressed a casual listener as indicating a trace of human irony.

But Cecily did not seem to notice it. "Perhaps I was excited that night, perhaps I was bolder because I knew you were near me; but I went up to him and touched him! And then, Dick! — oh, Dick! think how awful" —

Again Dick felt the thrill of superstitious terror creep over him. "And he vanished!" he said hoarsely.

"No — not at once," stammered Cecily, with her head almost buried in her lap; "for he — he — he took me in his arms, and" —

"And kissed you?" said Dick, springing to his feet, with every trace of his superstitious agony gone from his indignant face. But Cecily, without raising her head, caught at his gesticulating hand.

"Oh, Dick, Dick! do you think he really did it? The horror of it, Dick! to be kissed by a — a — man who has been dead a hundred years!"

"A hundred fiddlesticks!" said Dick furiously. "We have been deceived! No," he stammered, "I mean *you* have been deceived — insulted!"

"Hush! aunty will hear you," murmured the girl despairingly.

Dick, who had thrown away his cousin's hand, caught it again, and dragged her along the aisle of light to the window. The moon shone upon his flushed and angry face.

"Listen!" he said; "you have been fooled, tricked — infamously tricked by these people, and some confederate, whom — whom I shall horsewhip if I catch him. The whole story is a lie!"

"But you looked as if you believed it — about the girl," said Cecily; "you acted so strangely. I even thought, Dick, — sometimes — you had seen *him*."

Dick shuddered, trembled; but it is to be feared that the lower, more natural human element in him triumphed.

"Nonsense!" he stammered; "the girl was a foolish farrago of absurdities, improbable on the face of things, and impossible to prove. But that infernal, sneaking rascal was flesh and blood."

It seemed to him to relieve the situation and establish his own sanity to combat one illusion with another. Cecily had already been deceived — another lie would n't hurt her. But, strangely enough, he was satisfied that Cecily's visitant was real, although he still had doubts about his own.

"Then you think, Dick, it was actually some real man?" she said piteously. "Oh, Dick, I have been so foolish!"

Foolish she no doubt had been; pretty she certainly was, sitting there in her loosened hair, and pathetic, appealing earnestness. Surely the ghostly Rosita's glances were never so pleading as these actual honest eyes behind their curving lashes. Dick felt a strange, new-born sympathy of suffering, mingled tantalizingly with a new doubt and jealousy, that was human and stimulating.

"Oh, Dick, what are *we* to do?"

The plural struck him as deliciously sweet and subtle. Had they really been singled out for this strange experience, or still stranger hallucination? His arm crept around her; she gently withdrew from it.

"I must go now," she murmured; "but I could n't sleep until I told you all. You know, Dick, I have no one else to come to, and it seemed to me that *you* ought to know it first. I feel better for telling you. You will tell me to-morrow what you think we ought to do."

They reached the door, opening it softly. She lingered for a moment on the threshold.

"Tell me, Dick" (she hesitated), "if that — that really were a spirit, and not a real man, — you don't think that — that kiss" (she shuddered) "could do me harm!"

He shuddered too, with a strange and sympathetic consciousness that, happily, she did not even suspect. But he quickly recovered himself and said, with something of bitterness in his voice, "I should be more afraid if it really were a man."

"Oh, thank you, Dick!"

Her lips parted in a smile of relief; the color came faintly back to her cheek.

A wild thought crossed his fancy that seemed an inspiration. They would share the risks alike. He leaned towards her: their lips met in their first kiss.

"Oh, Dick!"

"Dearest!"

"I think — we are saved."

"Why?"

"It was n't at all like that."

He smiled as she flew swiftly down the corridor. Perhaps he thought so too.

. . . .

No picture of the alleged Rosita was ever found. Doña Felipa, when the story was again referred to, smiled discreetly, but was apparently too preoccupied with the return of Don José's absent nephew for further gossiping visits to the hacienda; and Dick and Cecily, as Mr. and Mrs. Bracy, would seem to have survived — if they never really solved — the mystery of the Hacienda de los Osos. Yet in the month of June, when the moon is high, one does not sit on the stone bench in the rose garden after the last stroke of the Angelus.

AN EPISODE OF WEST WOODLANDS

I

THE rain was dripping monotonously from the scant eaves of the little church of the Sidon Brethren at West Woodlands. Hewn out of the very heart of a thicket of buckeye spruce and alder, unsunned and unblown upon by any wind, it was so green and unseasoned in its solitude that it seemed a part of the arboreal growth, and on damp Sundays to have taken root again and sprouted. There were moss and shining spots on the underside of the unplaned rafters, little green pools of infusoria stood on the ledge of the windows whose panes were at times suddenly clouded by mysterious unknown breaths from without or within. It was oppressed with an extravagance of leaves at all seasons, whether in summer, when green and limp they crowded the porch, doorways, and shutters, or when, penetrating knot-holes and interstices of shingle and clapboard, on some creeping vine, they unexpectedly burst and bourgeoned on the walls like banners; or later, when they rotted in brown heaps in corners, outlined the edges of the floor with a thin yellow border, or invaded the ranks of the high-backed benches which served as pews.

There had been a continuous rustling at the porch and the shaking out of waterproofs and closing of umbrellas until the half-filled church was already redolent of damp dyes and the sulphur of India rubber. The eyes of the congregation were turned to the door with something more than the usual curiosity and expectation. For the new revivalist preacher from Horseshoe Bay was coming that morning. Already voices of authority were heard approaching, and keeping up their conversation to the very door of the sacred edifice in marked contrast with the awed and bashful whisperings in the porch of the ordinary congregation. The worshipers recognized the voices of deacons Shadwell and Bradley; in the reverential hush of the building they seemed charged with undue importance.

"It was set back in the road for quiet in the Lord's work," said Bradley.

"Yes, but it ought n't be hidden! Let your light so shine before men, you know, Brother Bradley," returned a deep voice, unrecognized and unfamiliar — presumably that of the new-comer.

"It would n't take much to move it — on skids and rollers — nearer to the road," suggested Shadwell tentatively.

"No, but if you left it stranded there in the wind and sun, green and sappy as it is now, ye 'd have every seam and crack startin' till the ribs shone through, and no amount of calkin' would make it water-tight agin. No; my idea is — clear out the brush and shadder around it! Let the light shine in upon it! Make the waste places glad around it, but keep it *there!* And that 's my idea o' gen'ral missionary work; that 's how the gospel orter be rooted."

Here the bell, which from the plain open four-posted belfry above had been clanging with a metallic sharpness that had an odd impatient worldliness about it, suddenly ceased.

"That bell," said Bradley's voice, with the same suggestion of conveying important truths to the listening congregation within, "was took from the wreck of the Tamalpais. Brother Horley bought it at auction at Horseshoe Bay and presented it. You know the Tamalpais ran ashore on Skinner's Reef, jest off here."

"Yes, with plenty of sea room, not half a gale o' wind blowing, and her real course fifty miles to westward! The whole watch must have been drunk or sunk in slothful idleness," returned the deep voice again. A momentary pause followed, and then the two deacons entered the church with the stranger.

He appeared to be a powerfully built man, with a square, beardless chin; a face that carried one or two scars of smallpox and a deeper one of a less peaceful suggestion, set in a complexion weather-beaten to the color of Spanish leather. Two small, moist gray eyes, that glistened with every emotion, seemed to contradict the hard expression of the other features. He was dressed in cheap black, like the two deacons, with the exception of a loose, black alpaca coat and the usual black silk neckerchief tied in a large bow under a turn-down collar, — the general sign and symbol of a minister of his sect. He walked directly to the raised platform at the end of the chapel, where stood a table on which was a pitcher of water, a glass, and a hymn-book, and a tall upright desk holding a Bible. Glancing over these details, he suddenly paused, carefully lifted some hitherto undetected object from the desk beside the Bible, and, stooping gently, placed it upon the floor. As it hopped away, the congregation saw that it was a small green frog. The intrusion was by no means an unusual one, but some odd contrast between this powerful man and the little animal affected them profoundly. No one — not even the youngest — smiled; every one — even the youngest — became suddenly attentive. Turning over the leaves of the hymn-book, he then gave out the first two lines of a hymn. The choir accordion in the front side bench awoke like an infant into wailing life, and Cissy Appleby, soprano, took up a little more musically the lugubrious chant. At the close of the verse the preacher joined in, after a sailor fashion, with a breezy bass that seemed to fill the little building with the trouble of the sea. Then followed prayer from Deacon

Shadwell, broken by "Amens" from the preacher, with a nautical suggestion of "Ay, ay," about them, and he began his sermon.

It was, as those who knew his methods might have expected, a suggestion of the conversation they had already overheard. He likened the little chapel, choked with umbrage and rotting in its dampness, to the gospel seed sown in crowded places, famishing in the midst of plenty, and sterile from the absorptions of the more active life around it. He pointed out again the true work of the pioneer missionary; the careful pruning and elimination of those forces that grew up with the Christian's life, which many people foolishly believed were a part of it. "The *World* must live and the *Word* must live," said they, and there were easy-going brethren who thought they could live together. But he warned them that the World was always closing upon — "shaddering" — and strangling the Word, unless kept down, and that "fair seemin' settlement," or city, which appeared to be "bustin' and bloomin'" with life and progress, was really "hustlin' and jostlin'" the Word of God, even in the midst of these "fancy spires and steeples" it had erected to its glory. It was the work of the missionary pioneer to keep down or root out this carnal, worldly growth as much in the settlement as in the wilderness. Some were for getting over the difficulty by dragging the mere wasted "letter of the Word," or the rotten and withered husks of it, into the highways and byways, where the "blazin'" scorn of the World would finish it. A low, penitential groan from Deacon Shadwell followed this accusing illustration. But the preacher would tell them that the only way was to boldly attack this rankly growing World around them; to clear out fresh paths for the Truth, and let the sunlight of Heaven stream among them.

There was little doubt that the congregation was moved

Whatever they might have thought of the application, the fact itself was patent. The rheumatic Beaseleys felt the truth of it in their aching bones; it came home to the fever-and-ague-stricken Filgees in their damp seats against the sappy wall; it echoed plainly in the chronic cough of Sister Mary Strutt and Widow Doddridge; and Cissy Appleby, with her round brown eyes fixed upon the speaker, remembering how the starch had been taken out of her Sunday frocks, how her long ringlets had become uncurled, her frills limp, and even her ribbons lustreless, felt that indeed a prophet had arisen in Israel!

One or two, however, were disappointed that he had as yet given no indication of that powerful exhortatory emotion for which he was famed, and which had been said to excite certain corresponding corybantic symptoms among his sensitive female worshipers. When the service was over, and the congregation crowded around him, Sister Mary Strutt, on the outer fringe of the assembly, confided to Sister Evans that she had "hearn tell how that when he was over at Soquel he prayed that pow'ful that all the wimmen got fits and tremblin' spells, and ole Mrs. Jackson had to be hauled off his legs that she was kneelin' and claspin' while wrestling with the Sperit."

"I reckon we seemed kinder strange to him this morning, and he wanted to jest feel his way to our hearts first," exclaimed Brother Jonas Steers politely. "He 'll be more at home at evenin' service. It 's queer that some of the best exhortin' work is done arter early candlelight. I reckon he 's goin' to stop over with Deacon Bradley to dinner."

But it appeared that the new preacher, now formally introduced as Brother Seabright, was intending to walk over to Hemlock Mills to dinner. He only asked to be directed the nearest way; he would not trouble Brother Shadwell or Deacon Bradley to come with him.

"But here 's Cissy Appleby lives within a mile o' thar, and you could go along with her. She 'd jest admire to show you the way," interrupted Brother Shadwell. "Would n't you, Cissy?"

Thus appealed to, the young chorister — a tall girl of sixteen or seventeen — timidly raised her eyes to Brother Seabright as he was about to repeat his former protestation, and he stopped.

"Ef the young lady *is* goin' that way, it 's only fair to accept her kindness in a Christian sperit," he said gently.

Cissy turned with a mingling of apology and bashfulness toward a young fellow who seemed to be acting as her escort, but who was hesitating in an equal bashfulness, when Seabright added: "And perhaps our young friend will come too?"

But the young friend drew back with a confused laugh, and Brother Seabright and Cissy passed out from the porch together. For a few moments they mingled with the stream and conversation of the departing congregation, but presently Cissy timidly indicated a diverging bypath, and they both turned into it.

It was much warmer in the open than it had been in the chapel and thicket, and Cissy, by way of relieving a certain awkward tension of silence, took off the waterproof cloak and slung it on her arm. This disclosed her five long brown cable-like curls that hung down her shoulders, reaching below her waist in some forgotten fashion of girlhood. They were Cissy's peculiar adornment, remarkable for their length, thickness, and the extraordinary youthfulness imparted to a figure otherwise precociously matured. In some wavering doubt of her actual years and privileges, Brother Seabright offered to carry her cloak for her, but she declined it with a rustic and youthful pertinacity that seemed to settle the question. In fact, Cissy was as much embarrassed as she was flattered by the company of this distinguished stranger. However, it would be known to all West Woodlands that he had walked home with her, while nobody but herself would know that they had scarcely exchanged a word. She noticed how he lounged on with a heavy, rolling gait, sometimes a little before or behind her as the path narrowed. At such times when they accidentally came in contact in passing, she felt a half uneasy physical consciousness of him, which she referred to his size, the scars on his face, or some latent hardness of expression, but was relieved to see that he had not observed it. Yet this was the man that made grown women cry; she thought of old Mrs. Jackson fervently grasping the plodding ankles before her, and a hysteric desire to laugh, with the fear that he might see it on her face, overcame her. Then she wondered if he was going to walk all the way home without speaking, yet she knew she would be more embarrassed if he began to talk to her.

Suddenly he stopped, and she bumped up against him.

"Oh, excuse me!" she stammered hurriedly.

"Eh?" He evidently had not noticed the collision. "Did you speak?"

"No! — that is — it was n't anything," returned the girl, coloring.

But he had quite forgotten her, and was looking intently before him. They had come to a break in the fringe of woodland, and upon a sudden view of the ocean. At this point the low line of coast-range which sheltered the valley of West Woodlands was abruptly cloven by a gorge that crumbled and fell away seaward to the shore of Horseshoe Bay. On its northern trend stretched the settlement of Horseshoe to the promontory of Whale Mouth Point, with its outlying reef of rocks curved inward like the vast submerged jaw of some marine monster, through whose blunt, tooth-like projections the ship-long swell of the Pacific streamed and fell. On the southern shore the light yellow sands of Punta de la Concepcion glittered like sunshine all the way to the olive-gardens and white domes of the mission. The two shores seemed to typify the two different climates and civilizations separated by the bay.

The heavy woodland atmosphere was quickened by the salt breath of the sea. The stranger inhaled it meditatively.

"That 's the reef where the Tamalpais struck," he said, "and more 'n fifty miles out of her course — yes, more 'n fifty miles from where she should have bin! It don't look nat'ral. No — it — don't — look — nat'ral!"

As he seemed to be speaking to himself, the young girl, who had been gazing with far greater interest at the foreign-looking southern shore, felt confused and did not reply. Then, as if recalling her presence, Brother Seabright turned to her and said: —

"Yes, young lady; and when you hear the old bell of the Tamalpais, and think of how it came here, you may rejoice in the goodness of the Lord that made even those who strayed from the straight course and the true reckoning the means of testifying onto Him."

But the young are quicker to detect attitudes and affectation than we are apt to imagine; and Cissy could distinguish a certain other straying in this afterthought or moral of the preacher called up by her presence, and knew that it was not the real interest which the view had evoked. She had heard that he had been a sailor, and, with the tact of her sex, answered with what she thought would entertain him: —

"I was a little girl when it happened, and I heard that some sailors got ashore down there, and climbed up this gully from the rocks below. And they camped that night — for there were no houses at West Woodlands then — just in the woods where our chapel now stands. It was funny, was n't it? — I mean," she corrected herself bashfully, "it was strange they chanced to come just there."

But she had evidently hit the point of interest.

"What became of them?" he said quickly. "They never came to Horseshoe Settlement, where the others landed from the wreck. I never heard of that boat's crew or of *any* landing *here*."

"No. They kept on over the range south to the mission. I reckon they did n't know there was a way down on this side to Horseshoe," returned Cissy.

Brother Seabright moved on and continued his slow, plodding march. But he kept a little nearer Cissy, and she was conscious that he occasionally looked at her. Presently he said: —

"You have a heavenly gift, Miss Appleby."

Cissy flushed, and her hand involuntarily went to one of her long, distinguishing curls. It might be *that*. The preacher continued: —

"Yes; a voice like yours is a heavenly gift. And you have properly devoted it to His service. Have you been singing long?"

"About two years. But I've got to study a heap yet."

"The little birds don't think it necessary to study to praise Him," said the preacher sententiously.

It occurred to Cissy that this was very unfair argument. She said quickly: —

"But the little birds don't have to follow words in the hymn-books. You don't give out lines to larks and bobolinks," and blushed.

The preacher smiled. It was a very engaging smile, Cissy thought, that lightened his hard mouth. It enabled her to take heart of grace, and presently to chatter like the very birds she had disparaged. Oh, yes; she knew she had to learn a great deal more. She had studied "some" already. She was taking lessons over at Point Concepcion, where her aunt had friends, and she went three times a week. The gentleman who taught her was not a Catholic, and, of course, he knew she was a Protestant. She would have preferred to live there, but her mother and father were both dead, and had left her with her aunt. She liked it better because it was sunnier and brighter there. She loved the sun and warmth. She had listened to what he had said about the dampness and gloom of the chapel. It was true. The dampness was that dreadful sometimes it just ruined her clothes, and even made her hoarse. Did he think they would really take his advice and clear out the woods round the chapel?

"Would you like it?" he asked pleasantly.

"Yes."

"And you think you would n't pine so much for the sunshine and warmth of the mission?"

"I 'm not pining," said Cissy with a toss of her curls, "for anything or anybody; but I think the woods ought to be cleared out. It 's just as it was when the runaways hid there."

"When the *runaways hid there!*" said Brother Seabright quickly. "What runaways?"

"Why, the boat's crew," said Cissy.

"Why do you call them runaways?"

"I don't know. Did n't *you?*" said Cissy simply. "Did n't you say they never came back to Horseshoe Bay. Perhaps I had it from aunty. But I know it 's damp and creepy; and when I was littler I used to be frightened to be alone there practicing."

"Why?" said the preacher quickly.

"Oh, I don't know," hurried on Cissy, with a vague impression that she had said too much. "Only my fancy, I guess."

"Well," said Brother Seabright after a pause, "we 'll see what can be done to make a clearing there. Birds sing best in the sunshine, and *you* ought to have some say about it."

Cissy's dimples and blushes came together this time. "That 's our house," she said suddenly, with a slight accent of relief, pointing to a weather-beaten farmhouse on the edge of the gorge. "I turn off here, but you keep straight on for the Mills; they 're back in the woods a piece. But," she stammered with a sudden sense of forgotten hospitality, "won't you come in and see aunty?"

"No, thank you, not now." He stopped, turning his gaze from the house to her. "How old is your house? Was it there at the time of the wreck?"

"Yes," said Cissy.

"It 's odd that the crew did not come there for help, eh?"

"Maybe they overlooked it in the darkness and the storm," said Cissy simply. "Good-by, sir."

The preacher held her hand for an instant in his powerful, but gently graduated grasp. "Good-by until evening service."

"Yes, sir," said Cissy.

The young girl tripped on towards her house a little agitated and conscious, and yet a little proud as she saw the faces of her aunt, her uncle, her two cousins, and even her discarded escort, Jo Adams, at the windows, watching her.

"So," said her aunt, as she entered breathlessly, "ye walked home with the preacher! It was a speshal providence and manifestation for ye, Cissy. I hope ye was mannerly and humble — and profited by the words of grace."

"I don't know," said Cissy, putting aside her hat and cloak listlessly. "He did n't talk much of anything — but the old wreck of the Tamalpais."

"What?" said her aunt quickly.

"The wreck of the Tamalpais, and the boat's crew that came up the gorge," repeated the young girl.

"And what did *he* know about the boat's crew?" said her aunt hurriedly, fixing her black eyes on Cissy.

"Nothing except what I told him."

"What *you* told him!" echoed her aunt, with an ominous color filling the sallow hollows of her cheek.

"Yes! He has been a sailor, you know — and I thought it would interest him; and it did! He thought it strange."

"Cecilia Jane Appleby," said her aunt shrilly, "do you mean to say that you threw away your chances of salvation and saving grace just to tell gossiping tales that you knew was lies, and evil report, and false witnesses!"

"I only talked of what I'd heard, aunt Vashti," said Cecilia indignantly. "And he afterwards talked of — of — my voice, and said I had a heavenly gift," she added, with a slight quiver of her lip.

Aunt Vashti regarded the girl sharply.

"And you may thank the Lord for that heavenly gift," she said, in a slightly lowered voice; "for ef ye had n't to use it to-night, I'd shut ye up in your room, to make it pay for yer foolish gaddin' *tongue!* And I reckon I'll escort ye to chapel to-night myself, miss, and get shut o' some of this foolishness."

II

The broad plaza of the Mission de la Concepcion had been baking in the day-long sunlight. Shining drifts from the outlying sand dunes, blown across the ill-paved roadway, radiated the heat in the faces of the few loungers like the pricking of liliputian arrows, and invaded even the cactus hedges. The hot air visibly quivered over the dark red tiles of the tienda roof as if they were undergoing a second burning. The black shadow of a chimney on the whitewashed adobe wall was like a door or cavernous opening in the wall itself; the tops of the olive and pear trees seen above it were russet and sere already in the fierce light.

Even the moist breath of the sea beyond had quite evaporated before it crossed the plaza, and now rustled the leaves in the mission garden with a dry, crepitant sound.

Nevertheless it seemed to Cissy Appleby, as she crossed the plaza, a very welcome change from West Woodlands. Although the late winter rains had ceased a month ago, — a few days after the revivalist preacher had left, — the woods around the chapel were still sodden and heavy, and the threatened improvement in its site had not taken place. Neither had the preacher himself alluded to it again; his evening sermon — the only other one he preached there — was unexciting, and he had, in fact, left West Woodlands without any display of that extraordinary exhortatory faculty for which he was famous. Yet Cissy, in spite of her enjoyment of the dry, hot mission, remembered him, and also recalled, albeit poutingly, his blunt suggestion that she was "pining for it." Nevertheless, she would have liked to sing for him *here* — supposing it was possible to conceive of a Sidon Brotherhood chapel at the mission. It was a great pity, she thought, that the Sidon Brotherhood and the Franciscan Brotherhood were not more brotherly *towards each other.* Cissy belonged to the former by hereditary right, locality, and circumstance, but it is to be feared that her theology was imperfect.

She entered a lane between the mission wall and a lighter iron-fenced inclosure, once a part of the garden, but now the appurtenance of a private dwelling that was reconstructed over the heavy adobe shell of some forgotten structure of the old ecclesiastical founders. It was pierced by many windows and openings, and that sunlight and publicity which the former padres had jealously excluded was now wooed from long balconies and verandas by the new proprietor, a well-to-do American. Elisha Braggs, whose name was generously and euphoniously translated by his native neighbors into "Don Eliseo," although a heretic, had given largess to the church in the way of restoring its earthquake-shaken tower, and in presenting a new organ to its dilapidated choir. He had further endeared himself to the conservative Spanish population by introducing no obtrusive improvements; by distributing his means through the old channels; by apparently inciting no further alien immigration, but contenting himself to live alone among them, adopting their habits, customs, and language. A harmless musical taste and a disposition to instruct the young boy choristers were equally balanced by great skill in horsemanship and the personal management of a ranch of wild cattle on the inland plains.

Consciously pretty, and prettily conscious in her white-starched, rose-sprigged muslin, her pink parasol, beribboned gypsy hat, and the long mane-like curls that swung over her shoulders, Cissy entered the house and was shown to the large low drawing-room on the ground-floor. She once more inhaled its hot potpourri fragrance, in which the spice of the Castilian rose-leaves of the garden was dominant. A few boys, whom she recognized as the choristers of the mission and her fellow pupils, were already awaiting her with some degree of anxiety and impatience. This fact, and a certain quick animation that sprang to the blue eyes of the master of the house as the rose-sprigged frock and long curls appeared at the doorway, showed that Cissy was clearly the favorite pupil.

Elisha Braggs was a man of middle age, with a figure somewhat rounded by the adipose curves of a comfortable life, and an air of fastidiousness which was, however, occasionally at variance with what seemed to be his original condition. He greeted Cissy with a certain nervous over-consciousness of his duties as host and teacher, and then plunged abruptly into the lesson. It lasted an hour, Cissy tactfully dividing his somewhat exclusive instruction with the others, and even interpreting it to their slower comprehension. When it was over, the choristers shyly departed, according to their usual custom, leaving Cissy and Don Eliseo — and occasionally one of the padres — to more informal practicing and performance. Neither the ingenuousness of Cissy nor the worldly caution of aunt Vashti had ever questioned the propriety of these prolonged and secluded séances; and the young girl herself, although by no means unaccustomed to the bashful attentions of the youth of West Woodlands, had never dreamed of these later musical interviews as being anything but an ordinary recreation of her art. The feeling of gratitude and kindness she had for Don Eliseo, her aunt's friend, had never left her conscious or embarrassed when she was alone with him. But to-day, possibly from his own nervousness and preoccupation, she was aware of some vague uneasiness, and at an early opportunity rose to go. But Don Eliseo gently laid his hand on hers and said : —

"Don't go yet ; I want to talk to you."

His touch suddenly reminded her that once or twice before he had done the same thing, and she had been disagreeably impressed by it. But she lifted her brown eyes to his with an unconsciousness that was more crushing than a withdrawal of her hand, and waited for him to go on.

"It is such a long way for you to come, and you have so little time to stay when you are here, that I am thinking of asking your aunt to let you live here at the mission, as a pupil, in the house of the Señora Hernandez, until your lessons are finished. Padre José will attend to the rest of your education. Would you like it ? "

Poor Cissy's eyes leaped up in unaffected and sparkling affirmation before her tongue replied. To bask in this beloved sunshine for days together ; to have this quaint Spanish life before her eyes, and those soft Spanish accents in her ears ; to forget herself in wandering in the old-time mission garden beyond ; to have daily access to Mr. Braggs's piano and the organ of the church — this was indeed the realization of her fondest dreams! Yet she hesitated. Somewhere in her inherited Puritan nature was a vague conviction that it was wrong, and it seemed even to find an echo in the warning of the preacher: this was what she was "pining for."

"I don't know," she stammered. "I must ask auntie; I should n't like to leave her; and there 's the chapel."

"Is n't that revivalist preacher enough to run it for a while?" said her companion, half-sneeringly.

The remark was not a tactful one.

"Mr. Seabright has n't been here for a month," she answered somewhat quickly. "But he 's coming next Sunday, and I 'm glad of it. He 's a very good man. And there 's nothing he don't notice. He saw how silly it was to stick the chapel into the very heart of the woods, and he told them so."

"And I suppose he 'll run up a brand-new meeting-house out on the road," said Braggs, smiling.

"No, he 's going to open up the woods, and let the sun and light in, and clear out the underbrush."

"And what 's that for?"

There was such an utter and abrupt change in the speaker's voice and manner — which until then had been lazily fastidious and confident — that Cissy was startled. And the change being rude and dictatorial, she was startled into opposition. She had wanted to say that the improvement had been suggested by *her*, but she took a more aggressive attitude.

"Brother Seabright says it 's a question of religion and morals. It 's a scandal and a wrong, and a disgrace to the Word, that the chapel should have been put there."

Don Eliseo's face turned so white and waxy that Cissy would have noticed it had she not femininely looked away while taking this attitude.

"I suppose that 's a part of his sensation style, and very effective," he said, resuming his former voice and manner. "I must try to hear him some day. But now in regard to your coming here, of course I shall consult your aunt, although I imagine she will have no objection. I only wanted to know how *you* felt about it." He again laid his hand on hers.

"I should like to come very much," said Cissy timidly; "and it 's very kind of you, I 'm sure; but you 'll see what auntie says, won't you?" She withdrew her hand after momentarily grasping his, as if his own act had been only a parting salutation, and departed.

Aunt Vashti received Cissy's account of her interview with a grim satisfaction. She did not know what ideas young gals had nowadays, but in *her* time she 'd been fit to jump outer her skin at such an offer from such a good man as Elisha Braggs. And he was a rich man, too. And ef he was goin' to give her an edication free, it was n't goin' to stop there. For her part, she did n't like to put ideas in young girls' heads, — goodness knows they 'd enough foolishness already; but if Cissy made a Christian use of her gifts, and 'tended to her edication and privileges, and made herself a fit helpmeet for any man, she would say that there were few men in these parts that was as "comf'ble ketch" as Lish Braggs, or would make as good a husband and provider.

The blood suddenly left Cissy's cheeks and then returned with uncomfortable heat. Her aunt's words had suddenly revealed to her the meaning of the uneasiness she had felt in Braggs's house that morning — the old repulsion that had come at his touch. She had never thought of him as a suitor or a beau before, yet it now seemed perfectly plain to her that this was the ulterior meaning of his generosity. And yet she received that intelligence with the same mixed emotions with which she had received his offer to educate her. She did not conceal from herself the pride and satisfaction she felt in this presumptive selection of her as his wife; the worldly advantages that it promised; nor that it was a destiny far beyond her deserts. Yet she was conscious of exactly the same sense of wrong-doing in her preferences — something that seemed vaguely akin to that "conviction of sin" of which she had heard so much — as when she received his offer of education. It was this mixture of fear and satisfaction that caused her alternate paling and flushing, yet this time it was the fear that came first. Perhaps she was becoming unduly sensitive. The secretiveness of her sex came to her aid here, and she awkwardly changed the subject. Aunt Vashti, complacently believing that her words had fallen on fruitful soil, discreetly said no more.

It was a hot morning when Cissy walked alone to chapel early next Sunday. There was a dry irritation in the air which even the northwest trades, blowing through the seaward gorge, could not temper, and for the first time in her life she looked forward to the leafy seclusion of the buried chapel with a feeling of longing. She had avoided her youthful escort, for she wished to practice alone for an hour before the service with the new harmonium that had taken the place of the old accordion and its unskillful performer. Perhaps, too, there was a timid desire to be at her best on the return of Brother Seabright, and to show him, with a new performance, that the "heavenly gift" had not been neglected. She opened the chapel with the key she always carried, "swished" away an intrusive squirrel, left the door and window open for a moment, until the beating of frightened wings against the rafters had ceased, and, after carefully examining the floor for spiders, mice, and other creeping things, brushed away a few fallen leaves and twigs from the top of the harmonium. Then, with her long curls tossed over her shoulders and hanging limply down the back of her new maple-leaf yellow frock, — which was also a timid recognition of Brother Seabright's return, — and her brown eyes turned to the rafters, this rustic St. Cecilia of the Coast Range began to sing. The shell of the little building dilated with the melody; the sashes of the windows pulsated; the two ejected linnets joined in timidly from their coigne of vantage in the belfry outside, and the limp vines above the porch swayed like her curls. Once she thought she heard stealthy footsteps without; once she was almost certain she felt the brushing of somebody outside against the thin walls of the chapel; and once she stopped to glance quickly at the window with a strange instinct that some one was looking at her. But she quickly reflected that Brother Seabright would come there only when the deacons did, and with them. Why she should think that it was Brother Seabright, or why Brother Seabright should come thus and at such a time, she could not have explained.

He did not, in fact, make his appearance until later, and after the congregation had quite filled the chapel; he did not, moreover, appear to notice her as she sat there, and when he gave out the hymn he seemed to have quietly overlooked the new harmonium. She sang her best, however, and more than one of the audience thought that "little Sister Appleby" had greatly improved. Indeed, it would not have seemed strange to some — remembering Brother Seabright's discursive oratory — if he had made some allusion to it. But he did not. His heavy eyes moved slowly over the congregation, and he began.

As usual he did not take a text. But he would talk to them that morning about "The Conviction of Sin" and the sense of wrong-doing that was innate in the sinner. This included all form of temptation, for what was temptation but the inborn consciousness of something to struggle against, and that was sin! At this apparently concise exposition of her own feelings in regard to Don Eliseo's offer, Cissy felt herself blushing to the roots of her curls. Could it be possible that Brother Seabright had heard of her temptation to leave West Woodlands, and that this warning was intended for her? He did not even look in her direction. Yet his next sentence seemed to be an answer to her own mental query. "Folks might ask," he continued, "if even the young and inexperienced should feel this — or was there a state of innocent guilt without consciousness?" He would answer that question by telling them what had happened to him that morning. He had come to the chapel, not by the road, but through the tangled woods behind them (Cissy started) — through the thick brush and undergrowth that was choking the life out of this little chapel — the wilderness that he had believed was never before trodden by human feet, and was known only to roaming beasts and vermin. But that was where he was wrong.

In the stillness and listening silence, a sudden cough from some one in one of the back benches produced that instantaneous diversion of attention common to humanity on such occasions. Cissy's curls swung round with the others. But she was surprised to see that Mr. Braggs was seated in one of the benches near the door, and from the fact of his holding a handkerchief to his mouth, and being gazed at by his neighbors, it was evident that it was he who had coughed. Perhaps he had come to West Woodlands to talk to her aunt! With the preacher before her, and her probable suitor behind her, she felt herself again blushing.

Brother Seabright continued. Yes, he was *wrong*, for there before him, in the depths of the forest, were two children. They were looking at a bush of "pizon berries," — the deadly nightshade, as it was fitly called, — and one was warning the other of its dangerous qualities.

"But how do you know it's the 'pizon berry'?" asked the other.

"Because it's larger, and nicer, and bigger, and easier to get than the real good ones," returned the other.

And it was so. Thus was the truth revealed from the mouths of babes and sucklings; even they were conscious of temptation and sin! But here there was another interruption from the back benches, which proved, however, to be only the suppressed giggle of a boy — evidently the youthful hero of the illustration, surprised into nervous hilarity.

The preacher then passed to the "Conviction of Sin" in its more familiar phases. Many brothers confounded this with *discovery* and *publicity*. It was not their own sin "finding them out," but others discovering it. Until that happened, they fancied themselves safe, stilling their consciences, confounding the blinded eye of the world with the all-seeing eye of the Lord. But were they safe even then? Did not sooner or later the sea deliver up its dead, the earth what was buried in it, the wild woods what its depths had hidden? Was not the foolish secret, the guilty secret, the forgotten sin, sure to be disclosed? Then if they could not fly from the testimony of His works, if they could not evade even their fellow man, why did they not first turn to Him? Why, from the penitent child at his mother's knee to the murderer on the scaffold, did they only at *the last* confess unto Him?

His voice and manner had suddenly changed. From the rough note of accusation and challenge it had passed into the equally rough, but broken and sympathetic, accents of appeal. Why did they hesitate longer to confess their sin — not to man — but unto Him? Why did they delay? Now — that evening! That very moment! This was the appointed time! He entreated them in the name of religious faith, in the name of a human brotherly love. His delivery was now no longer deliberate, but hurried and panting; his speech now no longer chosen, but made up of reiterations and repetitions, ejaculations, and even incoherent epithets. His gestures and long intonations which began to take the place of even that interrupted speech affected them more than his reasoning! Short sighs escaped them; they swayed to and fro with the rhythm of his voice and movements. They had begun to comprehend this exacerbation of emotion — this paroxysmal rhapsody. This was the dithyrambic exaltation they had ardently waited for. They responded quickly. First with groans, equally inarticulate murmurs of assent, shouts of "Glory," and the reckless invocation of sacred names. Then a wave of hysteria seemed to move the whole mass, and broke into tears and sobs among the women. In her own excited consciousness it seemed to Cissy that some actual struggle between good and evil — like unto the casting out of devils — was shaking the little building. She cast a hurried glance behind her and saw Mr. Braggs sitting erect, white and scornful. She knew that she too was shrinking from the speaker, — not from any sense of conviction, but because he was irritating and disturbing her innate sense of fitness and harmony, — and she was pained that Mr. Braggs should see him thus. Meantime the weird, invisible struggle continued, heightened, and, it seemed to her, incited by the partisan groans and exultant actions of those around her, until suddenly a wild despairing cry arose above the conflict. A vague fear seized her — the voice was familiar! She turned in time to see the figure of aunt Vashti rise in her seat with a hysterical outburst, and fall convulsively forward upon her knees! She would have rushed to her side, but the frenzied woman was instantly caught by Deacon Shadwell and surrounded by a group of her own sex and became hidden. And when Cissy recovered herself she was astonished to find Brother Seabright — with every trace of his past emotion vanished from his hard-set face — calmly taking up his coherent discourse in his ordinary level tones. The furious struggle of the moment before was over; the chapel and its congregation had fallen back into an exhausted and apathetic silence! Then the preacher gave out the hymn — the words were singularly jubilant among that usually mournful collection in the book before her — and Cissy began it with a tremulous voice. But it gained strength, clearness, and volume as she went on, and she felt thrilled throughout with a new human sympathy she had never known before. The preacher's bass supported her now for the first time not unmusically — and the service was over.

Relieved, she turned quickly to join her aunt, but a hand was laid gently upon her shoulder. It was Brother Seabright, who had just stepped from the platform. The congregation, knowing her to be the niece of the hysteric woman, passed out without disturbing them.

"You have, indeed, improved your gift, Sister Cecilia," he said gravely. "You must have practiced much."

"Yes — that is, no! — only a little," stammered Cissy. "But, excuse me, I must look after auntie," she added, drawing timidly away.

"Your aunt is better, and has gone on with Sister Shadwell. She is not in need of your help, and really would do better without you just now. I shall see her myself presently."

"But *you* made her sick already," said Cissy, with a sudden, half-nervous audacity. "You even frightened *me*."

"Frightened you?" repeated Seabright, looking at her quickly.

"Yes," said Cissy, meeting his gaze with brown, truthful eyes. "Yes, when you — when you — made those faces. I like to hear you talk, but" — She stopped.

Brother Seabright's rare smile again lightened his face. But it seemed sadder than when she had first seen it.

"Then you have been practicing again at the mission?" he said quietly; "and you still prefer it?"

"Yes," said Cissy. She wanted to appear as loyal to the mission in Brother Seabright's presence as she was faithful to West Woodlands in Mr. Braggs's. She had no idea that this was dangerously near to coquetry. So she said a little archly, "I don't see why *you* don't like the mission. You 're a missionary yourself. The old padres came here to spread the Word. So do you."

"But not in that way," he said curtly. "I 've seen enough of them when I was knocking round the world a seafaring man and a sinner. I knew them — receivers of the ill-gotten gains of adventurers, fools, and scoundrels. I knew them — enriched by the spoils of persecution and oppression; gathering under their walls outlaws and fugitives from justice, and flinging an indulgence here and an absolution there, as they were paid for it. Don't talk to me of *them* — I know them."

They were passing out of the chapel together, and he made an impatient gesture as if dismissing the subject. Accustomed though she was to the sweeping criticism of her Catholic friends by her West Woodlands associates, she was nevertheless hurt by his brusqueness. She dropped a little behind, and they separated at the porch. Notwithstanding her anxiety to see her aunt, she felt she could not now go to Deacon Shadwell's without seeming to follow him — and after he had assured her that her help was not required. She turned aside and made her way slowly towards her home.

There she found that her aunt had not returned, gathering from her uncle that she was recovering from a fit of "high strikes" (hysterics), and would be better alone. Whether he underrated her complaint, or had a conscious ness of his masculine helplessness in such disorders, he evidently made light of it. And when Cissy, afterwards, a little ashamed that she had allowed her momentary pique against Brother Seabright to stand in the way of her duty, determined to go to her aunt, instead of returning to the chapel that evening, he did not oppose it. She learned also that Mr. Braggs had called in the morning, but, finding that her aunt Vashti was at chapel, he had followed her there, intending to return with her. But he had not been seen since the service, and had evidently returned to the mission.

But when she reached Deacon Shadwell's house she was received by Mrs. Shadwell only. Her aunt, said that lady, was physically better, but Brother Seabright had left "partikler word" that she was to see nobody. It was an extraordinary case of "findin' the Lord," the like of which had never been known before in West Woodlands, and she (Cissy) would yet be proud of one of her "fammerly being speshally selected for grace." But the "workin's o' salvation was not to be finicked away on worldly things or even the affections of the flesh;" and if Cissy really loved her aunt, "she would n't interfere with her while she was, so to speak, still on the mourners' bench, wrastlin' with the Sperret in their back sittin'-room." But she might wait until Brother Seabright's return from evening chapel after service.

Cissy waited. Nine o'clock came, but Brother Seabright did not return. Then a small, but inconsequent dignity took possession of her, and she slightly tossed her long curls from her shoulders. She was not going to wait for any man's permission to see her own aunt. If auntie did not want to see her, that was enough. She could go home alone. She did n't want any one to go with her.

Lifted and sustained by these loftly considerations, with an erect head and slightly ruffled mane, well enwrapped in a becoming white merino "cloud," the young girl stepped out on her homeward journey. She had certainly enough to occupy her mind and, perhaps, justify her independence. To have a suitor for her hand in the person of the superior and wealthy Mr. Braggs, — for that was what his visit that morning to West Woodlands meant, — and to be personally complimented on her improvement by the famous Brother Seabright, all within twelve hours, was something to be proud of, even although it was mitigated by her aunt's illness, her suitor's abrupt departure, and Brother Seabright's momentary coldness and impatience. Oddly enough, this last and apparently trivial circumstance occupied her thoughts more than the others. She found herself looking out for him in the windings of the moonlit road, and when, at last, she reached the turning towards the little wood and chapel, her small feet unconsciously lingered until she felt herself blushing under her fleecy "cloud." She looked down the lane. From the point where she was standing the lights of the chapel should have been plainly visible; but now all was dark. It was nearly ten o'clock, and he must have gone home by another road. Then a spirit of adventure seized her. She had the key of the chapel in her pocket. She remembered she had left a small black Spanish fan — a former gift of Mr. Braggs — lying on the harmonium. She would go and bring it away, and satisfy herself that Brother Seabright was not there still. It was but a step, and in the clear moonlight.

The lane wound before her like a silver stream, except where it was interrupted and bridged over by jagged black shadows. The chapel itself was black, the clustering trees around it were black also; the porch seemed to cover an inky well of shadow; the windows were rayless and dead, and in the chancel one still left open showed a yawning vault of obscurity within. Nevertheless, she opened the door softly, glided into the dark depths, and made her way to the harmonium. But here the sound of footsteps without startled her; she glanced hurriedly through the open window, and saw the figure of Elisha Braggs suddenly revealed in the moonlight as he crossed the path behind the chapel. He was closely followed by two peons, whom she recognized as his servants at the mission, and they each carried a pickaxe. From their manner it was evident that they had no suspicion of her presence in the chapel. But they had stopped and were listening. Her heart beat quickly; with a sudden instinct she ran and bolted the door. But it was evidently another intruder they were watching, for she presently saw Brother Seabright quietly cross the lane and approach the chapel. The three men had disappeared; but there was a sudden shout, the sound of scuffling, the deep voice of Brother Seabright saying, "Back, there, will you! Hands off!" and a pause. She could see nothing; she listened in every pulse. Then the voice of Brother Seabright arose again quite clearly, slowly, and as deliberately as if it had risen from the platform in the chapel.

"Lish Barker! I thought as much! Lish Barker, first mate of the Tamalpais, who was said to have gone down with a boat's crew and the ship's treasure after she struck. I *thought* I knew that face to-day."

"Yes," said the voice of him whom she had known as Elisha Braggs, — "yes, and I knew *your* face, Jim Seabright, ex-whaler, slaver, pirate, and bo's'n of the Highflyer, marooned in the South Pacific, where you found the Lord — ha! ha! — and became the psalm-singing, converted American sailor preacher!"

"I am not ashamed before men of my past, which every one knows," returned Seabright slowly. "But what of *yours*, Elisha Barker — *yours* that has made you sham death itself to hide it from them? What of *yours* — spent in the sloth of your ill-gotten gains! Turn, sinner, turn! Turn, Elisha Braggs, while there is yet time!"

"Belay there, Brother Seabright; we're not *inside* your gospel-shop just now! Keep your palaver for those that need it. Let me pass, before I have to teach you that you haven't to deal with a gang of hysterical old women to-night."

"But not until you know that one of those women,—Vashti White,—by God's grace converted of her sins, has confessed her secret and yours, Elisha Barker! Yes! She has told me how her sister's husband—the father of the young girl you are trying to lure away—helped you off that night with your booty, took his miserable reward, and lived and died in exile with the rest of your wretched crew,—afraid to return to his home and country—whilst you—shameless and impenitent—lived in slothful ease at the mission!"

"Liar! Let me pass!"

"Not until I know your purpose here to-night."

"Then take the consequences! Here, Pedro! Ramon! Seize him. Tie him head and heels together, and toss him in the bush!"

The sound of scuffling recommenced. The struggle seemed fierce and long, with no breath wasted in useless outcry. Then there was a bright flash, a muffled report, and the stinging and fire of gunpowder at the window.

Transfixed with fear, Cissy cast a despairing glance around her. Ah, the bell-rope! In another instant she had grasped it frantically in her hands.

All the fear, indignation, horror, sympathy, and wild appeal for help that had arisen helplessly in her throat and yet remained unuttered, now seemed to thrill through her fingers and the tightened rope, and broke into frantic voice in the clanging metal above her. The whole chapel, the whole woodland, the clear, moonlit sky above were filled with its alarming accents. It shrieked, implored, protested, summoned, and threatened, in one ceaseless outcry, seeming to roll over and over — as, indeed, it did — in leaps and bounds that shook the belfry. Never before, even in the blows of the striking surges, had the bell of the Tamalpais clamored like that! Once she heard above the turmoil the shaking of the door against the bolt that still held firmly; once she thought she heard Seabright's voice calling to her; once she thought she smelled the strong smoke of burning grass. But she kept on, until the window was suddenly darkened by a figure, and Brother Seabright, leaping in, caught her in his arms as she was reeling, fainting, but still clinging to the rope. But his strong presence and some powerful magnetism in his touch restored her.

"You have heard all!" he said.

"Yes."

"Then, for your aunt's sake, for your dead father's sake, *forget* all. That wretched man has fled with his wounded hirelings — let his sin go with him. But the village is alarmed — the brethren may be here any moment! Neither question nor deny what I shall tell them. Fear nothing. God will forgive the silence that leaves the vengeance to His hands alone!" Voices and footsteps were heard approaching the chapel. Brother Seabright significantly pressed her hand and strode toward the door. Deacon Shadwell was first to enter.

"You here — Brother Seabright! What has happened?"

"God be praised!" said Brother Seabright cheerfully, "nothing of consequence. The danger is over! Yet, but for the courage and presence of mind of Sister Appleby a serious evil might have been done." He paused, and with another voice turned half interrogatively towards her. "Some children, or a passing tramp, had carelessly thrown matches in the underbrush, and they were ignited beside the chapel. Sister Appleby, chancing to return here for" —

"For my fan," said Cissy with a timid truthfulness of accent.

"Found herself unable to cope with it, and it occurred to her to give the alarm you heard. I happened to be passing and was first to respond. Happily the flames had made but little headway, and were quickly beaten down. It is all over now. But let us hope that the speedy clearing out of the underbrush and the opening of the woods around the chapel will prevent any recurrence of the alarm of to-night."

. . . .

That the lesson thus reiterated by Brother Seabright was effective, the following extract, from the columns of the "Whale Point Gazette," may not only be offered as evidence, but may even give the cautious reader further light on the episode itself: —

STRANGE DISCOVERY AT WEST WOODLANDS. — THE TAMALPAIS MYSTERY AGAIN.

The improvements in the clearing around the Sidon Chapel at West Woodlands, undertaken by the Rev. James Seabright, have disclosed another link in the mystery which surrounded the loss of the Tamalpais some years ago at Whale Mouth Point. It will be remembered that the boat containing Adams & Co.'s treasure, the Tamalpais' first officer, and a crew of four men was lost on the rocks shortly after leaving the ill-fated vessel. None of the bodies were ever recovered, and the treasure itself completely baffled the search of divers and salvers. A lidless box bearing the mark of Adams & Co., of the kind in which their treasure was usually shipped, was yesterday found in the woods behind the chapel, half buried in brush, bark, and windfalls. There were no other indications, except the traces of a campfire at some remote period, probably long before the building of the chapel. But how and when the box was transported to the upland, and by whose agency, still remains a matter of conjecture. Our reporter who visited the Rev. Mr. Seabright, who has lately accepted the regular ministry of the chapel, was offered every facility for information, but it was evident that the early settlers who were cognizant of the fact — if there were any — are either dead or have left the vicinity.

THE HOME-COMING OF JIM WILKES

I

For many minutes there had been no sound but the monotonous drumming of the rain on the roof of the coach, the swishing of wheels through the gravelly mud, and the momentary clatter of hoofs upon some rocky outcrop in the road. Conversation had ceased; the light-hearted young editor in the front seat, more than suspected of dangerous levity, had relapsed into silence since the heavy man in the middle seat had taken to regarding the ceiling with ostentatious resignation, and the thin female beside him had averted her respectable bonnet. An occasional lurch of the coach brought down a fringe of raindrops from its eaves that filmed the windows and shut out the sodden prospect already darkening into night. There had been a momentary relief in their hurried dash through Summit Springs, and the spectacle of certain newly arrived county delegates crowding the veranda of its one hotel; but that was now three miles behind. The young editor's sole resource was to occasionally steal a glance at the face of the one passenger who seemed to be in sympathy with him, but who was too far away for easy conversation. It was the half-amused, half-perplexed face of a young man who had been for some time regarding him from a remote corner of the coach with an odd mingling of admiring yet cogitating interest, which, however, had never extended to any further encouragement than a faint sad smile. Even this at last faded out in the growing darkness; the powerful coach lamps on either side that flashed on the wayside objects gave no light to the interior. Everybody was slowly falling asleep. Suddenly everybody woke up to find that the coach was apparently standing still! When it had stopped no one knew! The young editor lowered his window. The coach lamp on that side was missing, but nothing was to be seen. In the distance there appeared to be a faint splashing.

"Well," called out an impatient voice from the box above, "what do you make it?" It was the authoritative voice of Yuba Bill, the driver, and everybody listened eagerly for the reply.

It came faintly from the distance and the splashing. "Almost four feet here, and deepening as you go."

"Dead water?"

"No — back water from the Fork."

There was a general movement towards the doors and windows. The splashing came nearer. Then a light flashed on the trees, the windows, and — two feet of yellow water peacefully flowing beneath them! The thin female gave a slight scream.

"There 's no danger," said the expressman, now wading towards them with the coach lamp in his hand. "But we 'll have to pull round out of it and go back to the Springs. There 's no getting past this break to-night."

"Why did n't you let us know this before?" said the heavy man indignantly from the window.

"Jim," said the driver with that slow deliberation which instantly enforced complete attention.

"Yes, Bill."

"Have you got a spare copy of that reg'lar bulletin that the Stage Kempany issoos every ten minutes to each passenger to tell 'em where we are, how far it is to the next place, and wot 's the state o' the weather gin'rally?"

"No!" said the expressman grimly, as he climbed to the box, "there 's not one left. Why?"

"Cos the Emperor of Chiny 's inside wantin' one!

Hoop! Keep your seats down there! G'lang!" — the whip cracked, there was a desperate splashing, a backward and forward jolting of the coach, the glistening wet flanks and tossing heads of the leaders seen for a moment opposite the windows, a sickening swirl of the whole body of the vehicle as if parting from its axles, a long straight dragging pull, and — presently the welcome sound of hoofs once more beating the firmer ground.

"Hi! Hold up — driver!"

It was the editor's quiet friend who was leaning from the window.

"Is n't Wilkes's ranch just off here?"

"Yes, half a mile along the ridge, I reckon," returned the driver shortly.

"Well, if you 're not going on to-night, I 'll get off and stop there."

"I reckon your head 's level, stranger," said Bill approvingly; "for they 're about chock full at the Springs House."

To descend, the passenger was obliged to pass out by the middle seat and before the young editor. As he did so he cast a shy look on him and, leaning over, said hesitatingly, in a lower voice: "I don't think you will be able to get in at the Springs Hotel. If — if — you care to come with me to — to — the ranch, I can take care of you."

The young editor — a man of action — paused for an instant only. Then seizing his bag, he said promptly: "Thank you," and followed his newly found friend to the ground. The whip cracked, the coach rolled away.

"You know Wilkes?" he said.

"Ye-ee-s. He 's my father."

"Ah," said the editor cheerfully, "then you 're going home?"

"Yes."

It was quite light in the open, and the stranger, after a moment's survey of the prospect — a survey that, however, seemed to be characterized by his previous hesitation, — said: "This way," crossed the road, and began to follow a quite plain but long disused wagon track along the slope. His manner was still so embarrassed that the young editor, after gayly repeating his thanks for his companion's thoughtful courtesy, followed him in silence. At the end of ten minutes they had reached some cultivated fields and orchards; the stranger brightened, although still with a preoccupied air, quickened his pace, and then suddenly stopped. When the editor reached his side he was gazing with apparently still greater perplexity upon the level, half-obliterated, and blackened foundations of what had been a large farmhouse.

"Why, it's been burnt down!" he said thoughtfully.

The editor stared at him! Burnt down it certainly had been, but by no means recently. Grasses were already springing up from the charred beams in the cellar; vines were trailing over the fallen chimneys; excavations, already old, had been made among the ruins.

"When were you here last?" the editor asked abruptly.

"Five years ago," said the stranger abstractedly.

"Five years! — and you knew nothing of *this?*"

"No. I was in Tahiti, Australia, Japan, and China all the time."

"And you never heard from home?"

"No. You see I quo'led with the old man, and ran away."

"And you did n't write to tell them you were coming?"

"No." He hesitated, and then added: "Never thought o' coming till I saw *you.*"

"Me?"

"Yes; you and — the high water."

"Do you mean to say," said the young editor sharply, "that you brought *me* — an utter stranger to you — out of that coach to claim the hospitality of a father you had quarreled with — had n't seen for five years, and did n't know if he would receive you?"

"Yes, — you see that 's just *why* I did it. You see, I reckoned my chances would be better to see him along with a cheerful, chipper fellow like you. I did n't of course, kalkilate on this," he added, pointing dejectedly to the ruins.

The editor gasped; then a sudden conception of the unrivaled absurdity of the situation flashed upon him, — of his passively following the amiable idiot at his side in order to contemplate, in the falling rain and lonely night, a heap of sodden ruins, while the coach was speeding to Summit Springs and shelter, and, above all, the reason *why* he was invited, — until, putting down his bag, he leaned upon his stick, and laughed until the tears came to his eyes. At which his companion visibly brightened.

"I told you so," he said cheerfully; "I knew you 'd be able to take it — and the old man — in *that way*, and that would have fetched him round."

"For Heaven's sake! don't talk any more," said the editor, wiping his eyes, "but try to remember if you ever had any neighbors about here where we can stay to-night. We can't walk to Summit Springs, and we can't camp out on these ruins."

"There did n't use to be anybody nearer than the Springs."

"But that was five years ago, you say," said the editor impatiently; "and although your father probably moved away after the house burned down, the country 's been thickly settled since then. That field has been lately planted. There must be another house beyond. Let 's follow the trail a little farther."

They tramped along in silence, this time the editor leading. Presently he stopped.

"There's a house — in there — among the trees," he said, pointing. "Whose is it?"

The stranger shook his head dubiously. Although apparently unaffected by any sentimental consideration of his father's misfortune, the spectacle of the blackened ruins of the homestead had evidently shaken his preconceived plans.

"It wasn't there in *my* time," he said musingly.

"But it *is* there in *our* time," responded the editor briskly, "and *I* propose to go there. From what you have told me of your father — even if his house were still standing — our chances of getting supper and a bed from him would be doubtful! I suppose," he continued as they moved on together, "you left him in anger — five years ago?"

"Ye-es."

"Did he say anything as you left?"

"I don't remember anything particular that he *said*."

"Well, what did he *do?*"

"Shot at me from the window!"

"Ah!" said the young editor softly.

Nevertheless they walked on for some time in silence. Gradually a white picket-fence came into view at right angles with the trail, and a man appeared walking leisurely along what seemed to be the regularly traveled road, beside it. The editor, who had taken matters in his own hands, without speaking to his companion, ran quickly forward and accosted the stranger, briefly stating that he had left the stagecoach with a companion, because it was stopped by high water, and asked, without entering into further details, to be directed to some place where they could pass the night. The man quite as briefly directed him to the house among the trees, which he said was his own, and then leisurely pursued his way along the road. The young editor ran back to his companion, who had halted in the dripping shadow of a sycamore, and recounted his good fortune.

"I did n't," he added, "say anything about your father. You can make inquiries yourself later."

"I reckon there won't be much need of that," returned his companion. "You did n't take much note o' that man, did you?"

"Not much," said the editor.

"Well, *that's my father*, and I reckon that new house must be his."

II

The young editor was a little startled. The man he had just quitted certainly was not dangerous looking, and yet, remembering what his son had said, there *were* homicidal possibilities.

"Look here," he said quickly, "he's not there *now*. Why don't you seize the opportunity to slip into the house, make peace with your mother and sisters, and get them to intercede with your father when he returns?"

"Thar ain't any mother; she died afore I left. My sister Almiry's a little girl — though that's four years ago and mebbee she's growed. My brothers and me did n't pull together much. But I was thinkin' that mebbee *you* might go in thar for me first, and see how the land lays; then sorter tell 'em 'bout me in your takin', chipper, easy way; make 'em laugh, and when you've squared 'em — I'll be hangin' round outside — you kin call *me* in. Don't you see?"

The young editor *did* see. Ridiculous as the proposal would have seemed to him an hour ago, it now appeared practical, and even commended itself to his taste. His name was well known in the county and his mediation might be effective. Perhaps his vanity was slightly flattered by his companion's faith in him; perhaps he was not free from a certain human curiosity to know the rest; perhaps he was more interested than he cared to confess in the helpless home-seeker beside him.

"But you must tell me something more of yourself, and your fortune and prospects. They 'll be sure to ask questions."

"Mebbee they won't. But you can say I 've done well — made my pile over in Australia, and ain't comin' on *them.* Remember — say I 'ain't comin' on them'!"

The editor nodded, and then, as if fearful of letting his present impulse cool, ran off towards the house.

It was large and respectable looking, and augured well for the present fortunes of the Wilkeses. The editor had determined to attack the citadel on its weaker, feminine side, and when the front door was opened to his knock, asked to see Miss Almira Wilkes. The Irish servant showed him into a comfortable looking sitting-room, and in another moment with a quick rustle of skirts in the passage a very pretty girl impulsively entered. From the first flash of her keen blue eyes the editor — a fair student of the sex — conceived the idea that she had expected somebody else; from the second that she was an arrant flirt, and did not intend to be disappointed. This much was in his favor.

Spurred by her provoking eyes and the novel situation, he stated his business with an airy lightness and humor that seemed to justify his late companion's estimate of his powers. But even in his cynical attitude he was unprepared for the girl's reception of his news. He had expected some indignation or even harshness towards this man whom he was beginning to consider as a kind of detrimental outcast or prodigal, but he was astounded at the complete and utter indifference — the frank and heartless unconcern — with which she heard of his return. When she had followed the narrator rather than his story to the end, she languidly called her brothers from the adjoining room.

"This gentleman, Mr. Grey, of the 'Argus,' has come across Jim — and Jim is calculating to come here and see father."

The two brothers stared at Grey, slightly shrugged their shoulders with the same utter absence of fraternal sympathy or concern which the girl had shown, and said nothing.

"One moment," said Grey a little warmly; "I have no desire to penetrate family secrets, but would you mind telling me if there is any grave reason why he should not come? Was there any scandalous conduct, unpardonable offense — let us even say any criminal act on his part which makes his return to this roof impossible?"

The three looked at each other with a dull surprise that ended in a vacant, wondering smile.

"No, no," they said in one voice, — "no; only" —

"Only what?" asked Grey impatiently.

"Dad just hates him!"

"Like pizon," smiled Almira.

The young editor rose with a slight increase of color.

"Look here," said the girl, whose dimples had deepened as she keenly surveyed him, as if detecting some amorous artifice under his show of interest for her brother, "Dad's gone down to the sheepfold and won't be back for an hour. Yo' might bring — *yo' friend* — in."

"He ain't wantin' anything? Ain't dead broke — nor nothin', eh?" suggested one of the brothers dubiously.

Grey hastened to assure them of Jim's absolute solvency, and even enlarged considerably on his Australian fortune. They looked relieved, but not interested.

"Go and fetch him," said the witch, archly hovering near Grey with dancing eyes; "and mind *yo'* come back, too!"

Grey hesitated a moment and then passed out in the dark porch. A dripping figure emerged from the trees opposite. It was Jim.

"Your sister and brothers will see you," said Grey hastily, to avoid embarrassing details. "*He* won't be here for an hour. But I'd advise you to make the most of your time, and get the good will of your sister."

He would have drawn back to let the prodigal pass in alone, but the man appealingly seized his arm, and Grey was obliged to reënter with him. He noticed, however, that he breathed hard.

They turned slightly towards their relative, but did not offer to shake hands with him, nor did he with them. He sat down sideways on an unoffered chair.

"The old house got burnt!" he said, wiping his lips, and then drying his wet hair with his handkerchief.

As the remark was addressed to no one in particular it was some seconds before the elder brother replied, "Yes."

"Almira 's growed."

Again no one felt called upon to answer, and Almira glanced archly at the young editor as if he might have added, "and improved."

"You 've done well?" returned one of the brothers tentatively.

"Yes, I 'm all right," said Jim.

There was another speechless interval. Even the conversational Grey felt under some unhallowed spell of silence that he could not break.

"I see the old well is there yet," said Jim, wiping his lips again.

"Where dad was once goin' to chuck you down for givin' him back talk," said the younger brother casually.

To Mr. Grey's relief and yet astonishment, Jim burst into a loud laugh and rubbed his legs.

"That 's so — how old times *do* come back!"

"And," said the bright-eyed Almira, "there 's that old butternut-tree that you shinned up one day when we set the hounds on you. Goodness! how you scooted!"

Again Jim laughed loudly and nodded. "Yes, the same old butternut. How you *do* remember, Almira!" This admiringly.

"And don't you remember Delia Short?" continued Almira, pleased at the admiration, and perhaps a little exalted at the singular attention which the young editor was giving to those cheerful reminiscences. "She, you know, you was reg'larly sick after, so that we always allowed she kinder turned yo' brain afore *you* went away! Well! all the while you were courtin' her it appears she was secretly married to Jo — yo' friend — Jo Stacy. Lord! there was a talk about that! and about yo' all along thinkin' yo' had chances! Yo' friend here," with an arch glance at Grey, "who 's allus puttin' folks in the newspapers, orter get a hold on that!"

Jim again laughed louder than the others, and rubbed his lips. Grey, however, offered only the tribute of a peculiar smile and walked to the window.

"You say your father will return in an hour?" he said, turning to the elder brother.

"Yes, unless he kept on to Watson's."

"Where?" said Jim suddenly.

It struck Grey that his voice had changed, or rather that he was now speaking for the first time in his natural tone.

"Watson's, just over the bridge," explained his brother. "If he went there he won't be back till ten."

Jim picked up his India rubber cape and hat, said, "I reckon I 'll just take a turn outside until he gets back," and walked towards the door.

None of his relatives moved nor seemed to offer any opposition.

Grey followed him quickly. "I 'll go with you," he said.

"No," returned Jim with singular earnestness. "You stay here and keep 'em up cheerful like this. They 're doing all this for *you*, you know; Almiry 's just this chipper only on your account."

Seeing the young man was inflexible, Grey returned grimly to the room, but not until he had noticed, with some surprise, that Jim, immediately on leaving the house, darted off at a quick run through the rain and darkness. Preoccupied with this, and perhaps still influenced by the tone of the previous conversation, he did not respond readily to the fair Almira's conversational advances, and was speedily left to a seat by the fire alone. At the end of ten minutes he regretted he had ever come; when half an hour had passed he wondered if he had not better try to reach the Summit alone. With a lapse of an hour he began to feel uneasy at Jim's prolonged absence in spite of the cold indifference of the household. Suddenly he heard stamping in the porch, a muttered exclamation, and the voices of the two brothers in the hall. "Why, dad! what 's up? Yo' look half drowned!"

The door opened upon the sodden, steaming figure of the old man whom he had met on the road, followed by the two sons. But he was evidently more occupied and possessed by some mental passion than by his physical discomfort. Yet strong and dominant over both, he threw off his wet coat and waistcoat as he entered, and marched directly to the fire. Utterly ignoring the presence of a stranger, he suddenly turned and faced his family.

"Half drowned — yes! and I might have been hull drowned for that matter. The back water of the Fork is all over Watson's, and the bridge is gone. I stumbled onto this end of it in the dark, and went off, head first into twenty feet of water! Tried to fight my way out, but the current was agin me. I 'd bin down twice, and was going down for the third time, when somebody grabbed me by the scruff o' my neck and under the arm — so! — and swam me to the bank! When I scrambled up I sez: 'I can't see your face,' sez I, 'I don't know who you are,' sez I, 'but I reckon you're a white man and clear grit,' sez I, 'and there's my hand on it!' And he grabs it and sez, 'We're quits,' and scooted out o' my sight. And," continued the old man, staring at their faces and raising his voice almost to a scream, "who do you think it was? Why, *that sneakin' hound of a brother of yours — Jim!* Jim! the scallawag that I booted outer the ranch five years ago, crawlin', writhin' back again after all these years to insult his old father's gray hairs! And some of you — by God — once thought that *I* was hard on him!"

. . . .

The sun was shining brightly the next morning as the young editor halted the up coach in the now dried hollow. As he was clambering to a seat beside the driver, his elbow was jogged at the window. Looking down he saw the face of Jim.

"We had a gay talk last night, remembering old times, did n't we?" said the prodigal cheerfully.

"Yes, but — where are you going now?"

"Back to Australia, I reckon! But it was mighty good to drop in on the old homestead once more!"

"Rather," said the editor, clinging to the window and lingering in mid-air to the manifest impatience of Yuba Bill; "but I say — look here! — were you *quite* satisfied?"

Jim's hand tightened around the young editor's as he answered cheerfully, "Yes." But his face was turned away from the window.

A PROTEGEE OF JACK HAMLIN'S

I

THE steamer Silveropolis was sharply and steadily cleaving the broad, placid shallows of the Sacramento River. A large wave like an eagre, diverging from its bow, was extending to either bank, swamping the tules and threatening to submerge the lower levees. The great boat itself — a vast but delicate structure of airy stories, hanging galleries, fragile colonnades, gilded cornices, and resplendent frescoes — was throbbing throughout its whole perilous length with the pulse of high pressure and the strong monotonous beat of a powerful piston. Floods of foam pouring from the high paddle-boxes on either side and reuniting in the wake of the boat left behind a track of dazzling whiteness, over which trailed two dense black banners flung from its lofty smokestacks.

Mr. Jack Hamlin had quietly emerged from his stateroom on deck and was looking over the guards. His hands were resting lightly on his hips over the delicate curves of his white waistcoat, and he was whistling softly, possibly some air to which he had made certain card-playing passengers dance the night before. He was in comfortable case, and his soft brown eyes under their long lashes were veiled with gentle tolerance of all things. He glanced lazily along the empty hurricane deck forward; he glanced lazily down to the saloon deck below him. Far out against the guards below him leaned a young girl. Mr. Hamlin knitted his brows slightly.

He remembered her at once. She had come on board that morning with one Ned Stratton, a brother gambler, but neither a favorite nor intimate of Jack's. From certain indications in the pair, Jack had inferred that she was some foolish or reckless creature whom "Ed" had "got on a string," and was spiriting away from her friends and family. With the abstract morality of this situation Jack was not in the least concerned. For himself he did not indulge in that sort of game; the inexperience and vacillations of innocence were apt to be bothersome, and besides, a certain modest doubt of his own competency to make an original selection had always made him prefer to confine his gallantries to the wives of men of greater judgment than himself who had. But it suddenly occurred to him that he had seen Stratton quickly slip off the boat at the last landing stage. Ah! that was it; he had cast away and deserted her. It was an old story. Jack smiled. But he was not greatly amused with Stratton.

She was very pale, and seemed to be clinging to the network railing, as if to support herself, although she was gazing fixedly at the yellow glancing current below, which seemed to be sucked down and swallowed in the paddle-box as the boat swept on. It certainly was a fascinating sight — this sloping rapid, hurrying on to bury itself under the crushing wheels. For a brief moment Jack saw how they would seize anything floating on that ghastly incline, whirl it round in one awful revolution of the beating paddles, and then bury it, broken and shattered out of all recognition, deep in the muddy undercurrent of the stream behind them.

She moved away presently with an odd, stiff step, chafing her gloved hands together as if they had become stiffened, too, in her rigid grasp of the railing. Jack leisurely watched her as she moved along the narrow strip of deck. She was not at all to his taste, — a rather plump girl with a rustic manner and a great deal of brown hair under her straw hat. She might have looked better had she not been so haggard. When she reached the door of the saloon she paused, and then, turning suddenly, began to walk quickly back again. As she neared the spot where she had been standing her pace slackened, and when she reached the railing she seemed to relapse against it in her former helpless fashion. Jack became lazily interested. Suddenly she lifted her head and cast a quick glance around and above her. In that momentary lifting of her face Jack saw her expression. Whatever it was, his own changed instantly; the next moment there was a crash on the lower deck. It was Jack who had swung himself over the rail and dropped ten feet, to her side. But not before she had placed one foot in the meshes of the netting and had gripped the railing for a spring.

The noise of Jack's fall might have seemed to her bewildered fancy as a part of her frantic act, for she fell forward vacantly on the railing. But by this time Jack had grasped her arm as if to help himself to his feet.

"I might have killed myself by that foolin', might n't I?" he said cheerfully.

The sound of a voice so near her seemed to recall to her dazed sense the uncompleted action his fall had arrested. She made a convulsive bound towards the railing, but Jack held her fast.

"Don't," he said in a low voice, — "don't, it won't pay. It 's the sickest game that ever was played by man or woman. Come here!"

He drew her towards an empty state room whose door was swinging on its hinges a few feet from them. She was trembling violently; he half led, half pushed her into the room, closed the door, and stood with his back against it as she dropped into a chair. She looked at him vacantly; the agitation she was undergoing inwardly had left her no sense of outward perception.

"You know Stratton would be awfully riled," continued Jack easily. "He 's just stepped out to see a friend and got left by the fool boat. He 'll be along by the next steamer, and you 're bound to meet him in Sacramento."

Her staring eyes seemed suddenly to grasp his meaning. But to his surprise she burst out with a certain hysterical desperation, "No! no! Never! *never* again! Let me pass! I must go," and struggled to regain the door. Jack, albeit singularly relieved to know that she shared his private sentiments regarding Stratton, nevertheless resisted her. Whereat she suddenly turned white, reeled back, and sank in a dead faint in the chair.

The gambler turned, drew the key from the inside of the door, passed out, locking it behind him, and walked leisurely into the main saloon.

"Mrs. Johnson," he said gravely, addressing the stewardess, a tall mulatto, with his usual winsome supremacy over dependents and children, "you 'll oblige me if you 'll corral a few smelling salts, vinaigrettes, hairpins, and violet powder, and unload them in deck stateroom No. 257. There 's a lady" —

"A lady, Marse Hamlin?" interrupted the mulatto, with an archly significant flash of her white teeth.

"A lady," continued Jack with unabashed gravity, "in a sort of conniption fit. A relative of mine; in fact, a niece, my only sister's child. Had n't seen each other for ten years, and it was too much for her."

The woman glanced at him with a mingling of incredulous belief but delighted obedience, hurriedly gathered a few articles from her cabin, and followed him to No. 257. The young girl was still unconscious. The stewardess applied a few restoratives with the skill of long experience, and the young girl opened her eyes. They turned vacantly from the stewardess to Jack with a look of half recognition and half frightened inquiry.

"Yes," said Jack, addressing the eyes, although ostentatiously speaking to Mrs. Johnson, "she 'd only just come by steamer to 'Frisco and was n't expecting to see me, and we dropped right into each other here on the boat. And I have n't seen her since she was so high. Sister Mary ought to have warned me by letter; but she was always a slouch at letter-writing. There, that 'll do, Mrs. Johnson. She 's coming round; I reckon I can manage the rest. But you go now and tell the purser I want one of those inside staterooms for my niece, — *my niece*, you hear, — so that you can be near her and look after her."

As the stewardess turned obediently away the young girl attempted to rise, but Jack checked her.

"No," he said, almost brusquely; "you and I have some talking to do before she gets back, and we 've no time for foolin'. You heard what I told her just now! Well, it 's got to be as I said, you sabe. As long as you 're on this boat you 're my niece, and my sister Mary's child. As I have n't got any sister Mary, you don't run any risk of falling foul of her, and you ain't taking any one's place. That settles that. Now, do you or do you not want to see that man again? Say yes, and if he 's anywhere above ground I 'll yank him over to you as soon as we touch shore." He had no idea of interfering with his colleague's amours, but he had determined to make Stratton pay for the bother their slovenly sequence had caused him. Yet he was relieved and astonished by her frantic gesture of indignation and abhorrence. "No?" he repeated grimly. "Well, that settles that. Now, look here; quick, before she comes — do you want to go back home to your friends?"

But here occurred what he had dreaded most and probably thought he had escaped. She had stared at him, at the stewardess, at the walls, with abstracted, vacant, and bewildered, but always undimmed and unmoistened eyes.

A sudden convulsion shook her whole frame, her blank expression broke like a shattered mirror, she threw her hands over her eyes and fell forward with her face to the back of her chair in an outburst of tears.

Alas for Jack! with the breaking up of those sealed fountains came her speech also, at first disconnected and incoherent, and then despairing and passionate. No! she had no longer friends or home! She had lost and disgraced them! She had disgraced *herself!* There was no home for her but the grave. Why had Jack snatched her from it? Then bit by bit, she yielded up her story, — a story decidedly commonplace to Jack, uninteresting, and even irritating to his fastidiousness. She was a schoolgirl (not even a convent girl, but the inmate of a Presbyterian female academy at Napa. Jack shuddered as he remembered to have once seen certain of the pupils walking with a teacher), and she lived with her married sister. She had seen Stratton while going to and fro on the San Francisco boat; she had exchanged notes with him, had met him secretly, and finally consented to elope with him to Sacramento, only to discover when the boat had left the wharf the real nature of his intentions. Jack listened with infinite weariness and inward chafing. He had read all this before in cheap novelettes, in the police reports, in the Sunday papers; he had heard a street preacher declaim against it, and warn young women of the serpent-like wiles of tempters of the Stratton variety. But even now Jack failed to recognize Stratton as a serpent, or indeed anything but a blundering cheat and clown, who had left his dirty 'prentice work on his (Jack's) hands. But the girl was helpless and, it seemed, homeless, all through a certain desperation of feeling which, in spite of her tears, he could not but respect. That momentary shadow of death had exalted her. He stroked his mustache, pulled down his white waistcoat, and let her cry, without saying anything. He did not know that this most objectionable phase of her misery was her salvation and his own.

But the stewardess would return in a moment.

"You 'd better tell me what to call you," he said quietly. "I ought to know my niece's first name."

The girl caught her breath, and between two sobs said, "Sophonisba."

Jack winced. It seemed only to need this last sentimental touch to complete the idiotic situation.

"I 'll call you Sophy," he said hurriedly and with an effort. "And now look here! You are going in that cabin with Mrs. Johnson where she can look after you, but I can't. So I 'll have to take your word, for I 'm not going to give you away before Mrs. Johnson, that you won't try that foolishness — you know what I mean — before I see you again. Can I trust you?"

With her head still bowed over the chair back, she murmured slowly somewhere from under her disheveled hair: "Yes."

"Honest Injin?" adjured Jack gravely.

"Yes."

The shuffling step of the stewardess was heard slowly approaching.

"Yes," continued Jack abruptly, slightly lifting his voice, as Mrs. Johnson opened the door, — "yes, if you 'd only had some of those spearmint drops of your aunt Rachel's that she always gave you when these fits came on you 'd have been all right inside of five minutes. Aunty was no slouch of a doctor, was she? Dear me, it only seems yesterday since I saw her. You were just playing round her knee like a kitten on the back porch. How time does fly! But here 's Mrs. Johnson coming to take you in. Now rouse up, Sophy, and just hook yourself on to Mrs. Johnson on that side, and we 'll toddle along."

The young girl put back her heavy hair, and with her face still averted submitted to be helped to her feet by the kindly stewardess. Perhaps something homely sympathetic and nurselike in the touch of the mulatto gave her assurance and confidence, for her head lapsed quite naturally against the woman's shoulder, and her face was partly hidden as she moved slowly along the deck. Jack accompanied them to the saloon and the inner stateroom door. A few passengers gathered curiously near, as much attracted by the unusual presence of Jack Hamlin in such a procession as by the girl herself.

"You 'll look after her specially, Mrs. Johnson," said Jack, in unusually deliberate terms. "She 's been a good deal petted at home, and my sister perhaps has rather spoilt her. She 's pretty much of a child still, and you 'll have to humor her. Sophy," he continued, with ostentatious playfulness, directing his voice into the dim recesses of the stateroom, "you 'll just think Mrs. Johnson 's your old nurse, won't you? Think it 's old Katy, hey?"

To his great consternation the girl approached tremblingly from the inner shadow. The faintest and saddest of smiles for a moment played around the corners of her drawn mouth and tear-dimmed eyes as she held out her hand and said: —

"God bless you for being so kind."

Jack shuddered and glanced quickly round. But luckily no one heard this crushing sentimentalism, and the next moment the door closed upon her and Mrs. Johnson.

It was past midnight, and the moon was riding high over the narrowing yellow river, when Jack again stepped out on deck. He had just left the captain's cabin, and a small social game with the officers, which had served to some extent to vaguely relieve his irritation and their pockets. He had presumably quite forgotten the incident of the afternoon, as he looked about him, and complacently took in the quiet beauty of the night.

The low banks on either side offered no break to the uninterrupted level of the landscape, through which the river seemed to wind only as a race track for the rushing boat. Every fibre of her vast but fragile bulk quivered under the goad of her powerful engines. There was no other movement but hers, no other sound but this monstrous beat and panting; the whole tranquil landscape seemed to breathe and pulsate with her; dwellers in the tules, miles away, heard and felt her as she passed, and it seemed to Jack, leaning over the railing, as if the whole river swept like a sluice through her paddle-boxes.

Jack had quite unconsciously lounged before that part of the railing where the young girl had leaned a few hours ago. As he looked down upon the streaming yellow mill-race below him he noticed — what neither he nor the girl had probably noticed before — that a space of the top bar of the railing was hinged, and could be lifted by withdrawing a small bolt, thus giving easy access to the guards. He was still looking at it, whistling softly, when footsteps approached.

"Jack," said a lazy voice, "how 's sister Mary ?"

"It 's a long time since you 've seen her only child, Jack, ain't it ?" said a second voice ; "and yet it sort o' seems to me somehow that I 've seen her before."

Jack recognized the voice of two of his late companions at the card-table. His whistling ceased ; so also dropped every trace of color and expression from his handsome face. But he did not turn, and remained quietly gazing at the water.

"Aunt Rachel, too, must be getting on in years, Jack," continued the first speaker, halting behind Jack.

"And Mrs. Johnson does not look so much like Sophy's old nurse as she used to," remarked the second, following his example. Still Jack remained unmoved.

"You don't seem to be interested, Jack," continued the first speaker. "What are you looking at ?"

Without turning his head the gambler replied, "Looking at the boat; she 's booming along, just chawing up and spitting out the river, ain't she? Look at that sweep of water going under her paddle-wheels," he continued, unbolting the rail and lifting it to allow the two men to peer curiously over the guards as he pointed to the murderous incline beneath them; "a man would n't stand much show who got dropped into it. How these paddles would just snatch him bald-headed, pick him up, and slosh him round and round, and then sling him out down there in such a shape that his own father would n't know him."

"Yes," said the first speaker, with an ostentatious little laugh, "but all that ain't telling us how sister Mary is."

"No," said the gambler, slipping into the opening with a white and rigid face in which nothing seemed living but the eyes, — "no; but it 's telling you how two d—d fools who did n't know when to shut their mouths might get them shut once and forever. It 's telling you what might happen to two men who tried to 'play' a man who did n't care to be 'played,' — a man who did n't care much what he did, when he did it, or how he did it, but would do what he 'd set out to do — even if in doing it he went to hell with the men he sent there."

He had stepped out on the guards, beside the two men, closing the rail behind him. He had placed his hands on their shoulders; they had both gripped his arms; yet, viewed from the deck above, they seemed at that moment an amicable, even fraternal group, albeit the faces of the three were dead white in the moonlight.

"I don't think I 'm so very much interested in sister Mary," said the first speaker quietly, after a pause.

"And I don't seem to think so much of aunt Rachel as I did," said his companion.

"I thought you would n't," said Jack, coolly reopening the rail and stepping back again. "It all depends upon the way you look at those things. Good-night."

"Good-night."

The three men paused, shook each other's hands silently, and separated, Jack sauntering slowly back to his stateroom.

II

The educational establishment of Mrs. Mix and Madame Bance, situated in the best quarter of Sacramento and patronized by the highest state officials and members of the clergy, was a pretty if not an imposing edifice. Although surrounded by a high white picket-fence and entered through a heavily boarded gate, its balconies festooned with jasmine and roses, and its spotlessly draped windows as often graced with fresh, flower-like faces, were still plainly and provokingly visible above the ostentatious spikes of the pickets. Nevertheless, Mr. Jack Hamlin, who had six months before placed his niece, Miss Sophonisba Brown, under its protecting care, felt a degree of uneasiness, even bordering on timidity, which was new to that usually self-confident man. Remembering how his first appearance had fluttered this dovecote and awakened a severe suspicion in the minds of the two principals, he had discarded his usual fashionable attire and elegantly fitting garments for a rough homespun suit, supposed to represent a homely agriculturist, but which had the effect of transforming him into an adorable Strephon, infinitely more dangerous in his rustic shepherd-like simplicity. He had also shaved off his silken mustache for the same prudential reasons, but had only succeeded in uncovering the delicate lines of his handsome mouth, and so absurdly reducing his apparent years that his avuncular pretensions seemed more preposterous than ever; and when he had rung the bell and was admitted by a severe Irish waiting-maid, his momentary hesitation and half-humorous diffidence had such an unexpected effect upon her, that it seemed doubtful if he would be allowed to pass beyond the vestibule.

"Shure, miss," she said in a whisper to an under teacher, "there 's wan at the dhure who calls himself 'Mister' Hamlin, but av it is not a young lady maskeradin' in her brother's clothes oim very much mistaken; and av it 's a boy, one of the pupil's brothers, shure ye might put a dhress on him when you take the others out for a walk, and he'd pass for the beauty of the whole school."

Meantime the unconscious subject of this criticism was pacing somewhat uneasily up and down the formal reception room into which he had been finally ushered. Its farther end was filled by an enormous parlor organ, a number of music books, and a cheerfully variegated globe. A large presentation Bible, an equally massive illustrated volume on the Holy Land, a few landscapes in cold, bluish milk and water colors, and rigid heads in crayons — the work of pupils — were presumably ornamental. An imposing mahogany sofa and what seemed to be a disproportionate excess of chairs somewhat coldly furnished the room. Jack had reluctantly made up his mind that, if Sophy was accompanied by any one, he would be obliged to kiss her to keep up his assumed relationship. As she entered the room with Miss Mix, Jack advanced and soberly saluted her on the cheek. But so positive and apparent was the gallantry of his presence, and perhaps so suggestive of some pastoral flirtation, that Miss Mix, to Jack's surprise, winced perceptibly and became stony. But he was still more surprised that the young lady herself shrank half uneasily from his lips, and uttered a slight exclamation. It was a new experience to Mr. Hamlin.

But this somewhat mollified Miss Mix, and she slightly relaxed her austerity. She was glad to be able to give the best accounts of Miss Brown, not only as regarded her studies, but as to her conduct and deportment. Really, with the present freedom of manners and laxity of home discipline in California, it was gratifying to meet a young lady who seemed to value the importance of a proper decorum and behavior, especially towards the opposite sex. Mr. Hamlin, although her guardian, was perhaps too young to understand and appreciate this. To this inexperience she must also attribute the indiscretion of his calling during school hours and without preliminary warning. She trusted, however, that this informality could be overlooked after consultation with Madame Bance, but in the mean time, perhaps for half an hour, she must withdraw Miss Brown and return with her to the class. Mr. Hamlin could wait in this public room, reserved especially for visitors, until they returned. Or, if he cared to accompany one of the teachers in a formal inspection of the school, she added doubtfully, with a glance at Jack's distracting attractions, she would submit this also to Madame Bance.

"Thank you, thank you," returned Jack hurriedly, as a depressing vision of the fifty or sixty scholars rose before his eyes, "but I 'd rather not. I mean, you know, I 'd just as lief stay here *alone.* I would n't have called anyway, don't you see, only I had a day off, — and — and — I wanted to talk with my niece on family matters."

He did not say that he had received a somewhat distressful letter from her asking him to come; a new instinct made him cautious.

Considerably relieved by Jack's unexpected abstention, which seemed to spare her pupils the distraction of his graces, Miss Mix smiled more amicably and retired with her charge. In the single glance he had exchanged with Sophy he saw that, although resigned and apparently self-controlled, she still appeared thoughtful and melancholy. She had improved in appearance and seemed more refined and less rustic in her school dress, but he was conscious of the same distinct separation of her personality (which was uninteresting to him) from the sentiment that had impelled him to visit her. She was possibly still hankering after that fellow Stratton, in spite of her protestations to the contrary; perhaps she wanted to go back to her sister, although she had declared she would die first, and had always refused to disclose her real name or give any clue by which he could have traced her relations. She would cry, of course; he almost hoped that she would not return alone; he half regretted he had come. She still held him only by a single quality of her nature, — the desperation she had shown on the boat; that was something he understood and respected.

He walked discontentedly to the window and looked out; he walked discontentedly to the end of the room and stopped before the organ. It was a fine instrument; he could see that with an admiring and experienced eye. He was alone in the room; in fact, quite alone in that part of the house which was separated from the class-rooms. He would disturb no one by trying it. And if he did, what then? He smiled a little recklessly, slowly pulled off his gloves, and sat down before it.

He played cautiously at first, with the soft pedal down. The instrument had never known a strong masculine hand before, having been fumbled and friveled over by softly incompetent, feminine fingers. But presently it began to thrill under the passionate hand of its lover, and carried away by his one innocent weakness, Jack was launched upon a sea of musical reminiscences. Scraps of church music, Puritan psalms of his boyhood; dying strains from sad, forgotten operas, fragments of oratorios and symphonies, but chiefly phrases from old masses heard at the missions of San Pedro and Santa Isabel, swelled up from his loving and masterful fingers. He had finished an Agnus Dei; the formal room was pulsating with divine aspiration; the rascal's hands were resting listlessly on the keys, his brown lashes lifted, in an effort of memory, tenderly towards the ceiling.

Suddenly, a subdued murmur of applause and a slight rustle behind him recalled him to himself again. He wheeled his chair quickly round. The two principals of the school and half a dozen teachers were standing gravely behind him, and at the open door a dozen curled and frizzled youthful heads peered in eagerly, but half restrained by their teachers. The relaxed features and apologetic attitude of Madame Bance and Miss Mix showed that Mr. Hamlin had unconsciously achieved a triumph.

He might not have been as pleased to know that his extraordinary performance had solved a difficulty, effaced his other graces, and enabled them to place him on the moral pedestal of a mere musician, to whom these eccentricities were allowable and privileged. He shared the admiration extended by the young ladies to their music teacher, which was always understood to be a sexless enthusiasm and a contagious juvenile disorder. It was also a fine advertisement for the organ. Madame Bance smiled blandly, improved the occasion by thanking Mr. Hamlin for having given the scholars a gratuitous lesson on the capabilities of the instrument, and was glad to be able to give Miss Brown a half-holiday to spend with her accomplished relative. Miss Brown was even now upstairs, putting on her hat and mantle. Jack was relieved. Sophy would not attempt to cry on the street.

Nevertheless, when they reached it and the gate closed behind them, he again became uneasy. The girl's clouded face and melancholy manner were not promising. It also occurred to him that he might meet some one who knew him and thus compromise her. This was to be avoided at all hazards. He began with forced gayety: —

"Well, now, where shall we go?"

She slightly raised her tear-dimmed eyes.

"Where you please — I don't care."

"There is n't any show going on here, is there?"

He had a vague idea of a circus or menagerie — himself behind her in the shadow of the box.

"I don't know of any."

"Or any restaurant — or cake shop?"

"There 's a place where the girls go to get candy on Main Street. Some of them are there now."

Jack shuddered; this was not to be thought of.

"But where do you walk?"

"Up and down Main Street."

"Where everybody can see you?" said Jack, scandalized.

The girl nodded.

They walked on in silence for a few moments. Then a bright idea struck Mr. Hamlin. He suddenly remembered that in one of his many fits of impulsive generosity and largess he had given to an old negro retainer — whose wife had nursed him through a dangerous illness — a house and lot on the river bank. He had been told that they had opened a small laundry or wash-house. It occurred to him that a stroll there and a call upon "Uncle Hannibal and Aunt Chloe" combined the propriety and respectability due to the young person he was with, and the requisite secrecy and absence of publicity due to himself. He at once suggested it.

"You see she was a mighty good woman, and you ought to know her, for she was my old nurse" —

The girl glanced at him with a sudden impatience.

"Honest Injin," said Jack solemnly; "she did nurse me through my last cough. I ain't playing old family gags on you now."

"Oh, dear," burst out the girl impulsively, "I do wish you would n't ever play them again. I wish you would n't pretend to be my uncle; I wish you would n't make me pass for your niece. It is n't right. It 's all wrong. Oh, don't you know it 's all wrong, and can't come right any way? It 's just killing me. I can't stand it. I 'd rather you 'd say what I am and how I came to you and how you pitied me."

They had luckily entered a narrow side street, and the sobs which shook the young girl's frame were unnoticed. For a few moments Jack felt a horrible conviction stealing over him, that in his present attitude towards her he was not unlike that hound Stratton, and that, however innocent his own intent, there was a sickening resemblance to the situation on the boat in the base advantage he had taken of her friendlessness. He had never told her that he was a gambler like Stratton, and that his peculiar infelix reputation among women made it impossible for him to assist her, except by stealth or the deception he had practiced, without compromising her. He who had for years faced the sneers and half-frightened opposition of the world dared not tell the truth to this girl, from whom he expected nothing and who did not interest him. He felt he was almost slinking at her side. At last he said desperately: —

"But I snatched them bald-headed at the organ, Sophy, did n't I?"

"Oh, yes," said the girl, "you played beautifully and grandly. It was so good of you, too. For I think, somehow, Madame Bance had been a little suspicious of you, but that settled it. Everybody thought it was fine, and some thought it was your profession. Perhaps," she added timidly, "it is."

"I play a good deal, I reckon," said Jack, with a grim humor which did not, however, amuse him.

"I wish *I* could, and make money by it," said the girl eagerly. Jack winced, but she did not notice it as she went on hurriedly: "That 's what I wanted to talk to you about. I want to leave the school and make my own living. Anywhere where people won't know me and where I can be alone and work. I shall die here among these girls — with all their talk of their friends and their — sisters, — and their questions about you."

"Tell 'em to dry up," said Jack indignantly. "Take 'em to the cake shop and load 'em up with candy and ice cream. That 'll stop their mouths. You 've got money, — you got my last remittance, did n't you?" he repeated quickly. "If you did n't, here 's" — his hand was already in his pocket when she stopped him with a despairing gesture.

"Yes, yes, I got it all. I have n't touched it. I don't want it. For I can't live on you. Don't you understand, — I want to work. Listen, — I can draw and paint. Madame Bance says I do it well; my drawing-master says I might in time take portraits and get paid for it. And even now I can retouch photographs and make colored miniatures from them. And," she stopped and glanced at Jack half timidly, "I 've — done some already."

A glow of surprised relief suffused the gambler. Not so much at this astonishing revelation as at the change it seemed to effect in her. Her pale blue eyes, made paler by tears, cleared and brightened under their swollen lids like wiped steel; the lines of her depressed mouth straightened and became firm. Her voice had lost its hopeless monotone.

"There 's a shop in the next street, — a photographer's, — where they have one of mine in their windows," she went on, reassured by Jack's unaffected interest. "It 's only round the corner, if you care to see."

Jack assented; a few paces farther brought them to the corner of a narrow street, where they presently turned into a broader thoroughfare and stopped before the window of a photographer. Sophy pointed to an oval frame, containing a portrait painted on porcelain. Mr. Hamlin was startled. Inexperienced as he was, a certain artistic inclination told him it was good, although it is to be feared he would have been astonished even if it had been worse. The mere fact that this headstrong country girl, who had run away with a cur like Stratton, should be able to do anything else took him by surprise.

"I got ten dollars for that," she said hesitatingly, "and I could have got more for a larger one, but I had to do that in my room, during recreation hours. If I had more time and a place where I could work" — she stopped timidly and looked tentatively at Jack. But he was already indulging in a characteristically reckless idea of coming back after he had left Sophy, buying the miniature at an extravagant price, and ordering half a dozen more at extraordinary figures. Here, however, two passers-by, stopping ostensibly to look in the window, but really attracted by the picturesque spectacle of the handsome young rustic and his schoolgirl companion, gave Jack such a fright that he hurried Sophy away again into the side street.

"There 's nothing mean about that picture business," he said cheerfully; "it looks like a square kind of game," and relapsed into thoughtful silence.

At which Sophy, the ice of restraint broken, again burst into passionate appeal. If she could only go away somewhere — where she saw no one but the people who would buy her work, who knew nothing of her past nor cared to know who were her relations! She would work hard; she knew she could support herself in time. She would keep the name he had given her, — it was not distinctive enough to challenge any inquiry, — but nothing more. She need not assume to be his niece; he would always be her kind friend, to whom she owed everything, even her miserable life. She trusted still to his honor never to seek to know her real name, nor ever to speak to her of that man if he ever met him. It would do no good to her or to them; it might drive her, for she was not yet quite sure of herself, to do that which she had promised him never to do again.

There was no threat, impatience, or acting in her voice, but he recognized the same dull desperation he had once heard in it, and her eyes, which a moment before were quick and mobile, had become fixed and set. He had no idea of trying to penetrate the foolish secret of her name and relations; he had never had the slightest curiosity, but it struck him now that Stratton might at any time force it upon him. The only way that he could prevent it was to let it be known that, for unexpressed reasons, he would shoot Stratton "on sight." This would naturally restrict any verbal communication between them. Jack's ideas of morality were vague, but his convictions on points of honor were singularly direct and positive.

III

Meantime Hamlin and Sophy were passing the outskirts of the town; the open lots and cleared spaces were giving way to grassy stretches, willow copses, and groups of cottonwood and sycamore; and beyond the level of yellowing tules appeared the fringed and raised banks of the river. Half tropical looking cottages with deep verandas — the homes of early Southern pioneers — took the place of incomplete blocks of modern houses, monotonously alike. In these sylvan surroundings Mr. Hamlin's picturesque rusticity looked less incongruous and more Arcadian; the young girl had lost some of her restraint with her confidences, and lounging together side by side, without the least consciousness of any sentiment in their words or actions, they nevertheless contrived to impress the spectator with the idea that they were a charming pair of pastoral lovers. So strong was this impression that, as they approached aunt Chloe's laundry, a pretty rose-covered cottage with an enormous whitewashed barn-like extension in the rear, the black proprietress herself, standing at the door, called her husband to come and look at them, and flashed her white teeth in such unqualified commendation and patronage that Mr. Hamlin, withdrawing himself from Sophy's side, instantly charged down upon them.

"If you don't slide the lid back over that grinning box of dominoes of yours and take it inside, I 'll just carry Hannibal off with me," he said in a quick whisper, with a half-wicked, half-mischievous glitter in his brown eyes. "That young lady 's — *a lady* — do you understand? No riffraff friend of mine, but a regular *nun* — a saint — do you hear? So you just stand back and let her take a good look round, and rest herself, until she wants you." "Two black idiots, Miss Brown," he continued cheerfully in a higher voice of explanation, as Sophy approached, "who think because one of 'em used to shave me and the other saved my life they 've got a right to stand at their humble cottage door and frighten horses!"

So great was Mr. Hamlin's ascendency over his former servants that even this ingenious pleasantry was received with every sign of affection and appreciation of the humorist, and of the profound respect for his companion. Aunt Chloe showed them effusively into her parlor, a small but scrupulously neat and sweet-smelling apartment, inordinately furnished with a huge mahogany centre-table and chairs, and the most fragile and meretricious china and glass ornaments on the mantel. But the three jasmine-edged lattice windows opened upon a homely garden of old-fashioned herbs and flowers, and their fragrance filled the room. The cleanest and starchiest of curtains, the most dazzling and whitest of tidies and chair-covers, bespoke the adjacent laundry; indeed, the whole cottage seemed to exhale the odors of lavender soap and freshly ironed linen. Yet the cottage was large for the couple and their assistants.

"Dar was two front rooms on de next flo' dat dey never used,'' explained Aunt Chloe; "friends allowed dat dey could let 'em to white folks, but dey had always been done kep' for Marse Hamlin, ef he ever wanted to be wid his old niggers again.''

Jack looked up quickly with a brightened face, made a sign to Hannibal, and the two left the room together.

When he came through the passage a few moments later, there was a sound of laughter in the parlor. He recognized the full, round, lazy, chuckle of Aunt Chloe, but there was a higher girlish ripple that he did not know. He had never heard Sophy laugh before. Nor, when he entered, had he ever seen her so animated. She was helping Chloe set the table, to that lady's intense delight at "Missy's" girlish housewifery. She was picking the berries fresh from the garden, buttering the Sally Lunn, making the tea, and arranging the details of the repast with apparently no trace of her former discontent and unhappiness in either face or manner. He dropped quietly into a chair by the window, and, with the homely scents of the garden mixing with the honest odors of Aunt Chloe's cookery, watched her with an amusement that was as pleasant and grateful as it was strange and unprecedented.

"Now, den,'' said Aunt Chloe to her husband, as she put the finishing touch to the repast in a plate of doughnuts as exquisitely brown and shining as Jack's eyes were at that moment, "Hannibal, you just come away, and let dem two white quality chillens have dey tea. Dey 's done starved, shuah.'' And with an approving nod to Jack, she bundled her husband from the room.

The door closed; the young girl began to pour out the tea, but Jack remained in his seat by the window. It was a singular sensation which he did not care to disturb. It was no new thing for Mr. Hamlin to find himself at a tête-à-tête repast with the admiring and complaisant fair; there was a cabinet particulier in a certain San Francisco restaurant which had listened to their various vanities and professions of undying faith; he might have recalled certain festal rendezvous with a widow whose piety and impeccable reputation made it a moral duty for her to come to him only in disguise; it was but a few days before that he had been let privately into the palatial mansion of a high official for a midnight supper with a foolish wife. It was not strange, therefore, that he should be alone here, secretly, with a member of that indirect, loving sex. But that he should be sitting there in a cheap negro laundry with absolutely no sentiment of any kind towards the heavy-haired, freckled-faced country schoolgirl opposite him, from whom he sought and expected nothing, and *enjoying* it without scorn of himself or his companion, to use his own expression, "got him." Presently he rose and sauntered to the table with shining eyes.

"Well, what do you think of Aunt Chloe's shebang?" he asked smilingly.

"Oh, it's so sweet and clean and homelike," said the girl quickly.

At any other time he would have winced at the last adjective. It struck him now as exactly the word.

"Would you like to live here, if you could?"

Her face brightened. She put the teapot down and gazed fixedly at Jack.

"Because you can. Look here. I spoke to Hannibal about it. You can have the two front rooms if you want to. One of 'em is big enough and light enough for a studio to do your work in. You tell that nigger what you want to put in 'em, and he's got my orders to do it. I told him about your painting; said you were the daughter of an old friend, you know. Hold on, Sophy; d—n it all, I've got to do a little gilt-edged lying; but I let you out of the niece business this time. Yes, from this moment I'm no longer your uncle. I renounce the relationship. It's hard," continued the rascal, "after all these years and considering sister Mary's feelings; but, as you seem to wish it, it must be done."

Sophy's steel-blue eyes softened. She slid her long brown hand across the table and grasped Jack's. He returned the pressure quickly and fraternally, even to that half-shamed half-hurried evasion of emotion peculiar to all brothers. This was also a new sensation; but he liked it.

"You are too — too good, Mr. Hamlin," she said quietly.

"Yes," said Jack cheerfully, "that 's what 's the matter with me. It is n't natural, and if I keep it up too long it brings on my cough."

Nevertheless, they were happy in a boy and girl fashion, eating heartily, and, I fear, not always decorously; scrambling somewhat for the strawberries, and smacking their lips over the Sally Lunn. Meantime, it was arranged that Mr. Hamlin should inform Miss Mix that Sophy would leave school at the end of the term, only a few days hence, and then transfer herself to lodgings with some old family servants, where she could more easily pursue her studies in her own profession. She need not make her place of abode a secret, neither need she court publicity. She would write to Jack regularly, informing him of her progress, and he would visit her whenever he could. Jack assented gravely to the further proposition that he was to keep a strict account of all the moneys he advanced her, and that she was to repay him out of the proceeds of her first pictures. He had promised also, with a slight mental reservation, not to buy them all himself, but to trust to her success with the public. They were never to talk of what had happened before; she was to begin life anew. Of such were their confidences, spoken often together at the same moment, and with their mouths full. Only one thing troubled Jack: he had not yet told her frankly who he was and what was his reputation. He had hitherto carelessly supposed she would learn it, and in truth had cared little if she did; but it was evident from her conversation that day that by some miracle she was still in ignorance. Unable to tell her himself, he had charged Hannibal to break it to her casually after he was gone.

"You can let me down easy if you like, but you'd better make a square deal of it while you're about it. And," Jack had added cheerfully, "if she thinks after that she'd better drop me entirely, you just say that if she wishes to *stay*, you'll see that I don't ever come here again. And you keep your word about it too, you black nigger, or I'll be the first to thrash you."

Nevertheless, when Hannibal and Aunt Chloe returned to clear away the repast, they were a harmonious party; albeit Mr. Hamlin seemed more content to watch them silently from his chair by the window, a cigar between his lips, and the pleasant distraction of the homely scents and sounds of the garden in his senses. Allusion having been made again to the morning performance of the organ, he was implored by Hannibal to diversify his talent by exercising it on an old guitar which had passed into that retainer's possession with certain clothes of his master's when they separated. Mr. Hamlin accepted it dubiously; it had twanged under his volatile fingers in more pretentious but less innocent halls. But presently he raised his tenor voice and soft brown lashes to the humble ceiling and sang.

"Way down upon the Swanee River,"

discoursed Jack plaintively, —

"Far, far away,
Thar's whar my heart is turning ever,
Thar's whar the old folks stay."

The two dusky scions of an emotional race, that had been wont to sweeten its toils and condone its wrongs with music, sat wrapt and silent, swaying with Jack's voice until they could burst in upon the chorus. The jasmine vines trilled softly with the afternoon breeze; a slender yellow-hammer, perhaps emulous of Jack, swung himself from an outer spray and peered curiously into the room; and a few neighbors, gathering at their doors and windows, remarked that "after all, when it came to real singing, no one could beat those d—d niggers."

The sun was slowly sinking in the rolling gold of the river when Jack and Sophy started leisurely back through the broken shafts of light, and across the far-stretching shadows of the cottonwoods. In the midst of a lazy silence they were presently conscious of a distant monotonous throb, the booming of the up boat on the river. The sound came nearer — passed them, the boat itself hidden by the trees; but a trailing cloud of smoke above cast a momentary shadow upon their path. The girl looked up at Jack with a troubled face. Mr. Hamlin smiled reassuringly; but in that instant he had made up his mind that it was his moral duty to kill Mr. Edward Stratton.

IV

For the next two months Mr. Hamlin was professionally engaged in San Francisco and Marysville, and the transfer of Sophy from the school to her new home was effected without his supervision. From letters received by him during that interval, it seemed that the young girl had entered energetically upon her new career, and that her artistic efforts were crowned with success. There were a few Indian-ink sketches, studies made at school and expanded in her own "studio," which were eagerly bought as soon as exhibited in the photographer's window, — notably by a florid and inartistic bookkeeper, an old negro woman, a slangy stable boy, a gorgeously dressed and painted female, and the bearded second officer of a river steamboat, without hesitation and without comment. This, as Mr. Hamlin intelligently pointed out in a letter to Sophy, showed a general and diversified appreciation on the part of the public. Indeed, it emboldened her, in the retouching of photographs, to offer sittings to the subjects, and to undertake even large crayon copies, which had resulted in her getting so many orders that she was no longer obliged to sell her drawings, but restricted herself solely to profitable portraiture. The studio became known; even its quaint surroundings added to the popular interest, and the originality and independence of the young painter helped her to a genuine success. All this she wrote to Jack. Meantime Hannibal had assured him that he had carried out his instructions by informing "Missy" of his old master's real occupation and reputation, but that the young lady had n't "took no notice." Certainly there was no allusion to it in her letters, nor any indication in her manner. Mr. Hamlin was greatly, and it seemed to him properly, relieved. And he looked forward with considerable satisfaction to an early visit to old Hannibal's laundry.

It must be confessed, also, that another matter, a simple affair of gallantry, was giving him an equally unusual, unexpected, and absurd annoyance, which he had never before permitted to such trivialities. In a recent visit to a fashionable watering-place he had attracted the attention of what appeared to be a respectable, matter-of-fact woman, the wife of a recently elected rural senator. She was, however, singularly beautiful, and as singularly cold. It was perhaps this quality, and her evident annoyance at some unreasoning prepossession which Jack's fascinations exercised upon her, that heightened that reckless desire for risk and excitement which really made up the greater part of his gallantry. Nevertheless, as was his habit, he had treated her always with a charming unconsciousness of his own attentions, and a frankness that seemed inconsistent with any insidious approach. In fact, Mr. Hamlin seldom made love to anybody, but permitted it to be made to him with good-humored deprecation and cheerful skepticism. He had once, quite accidentally, while riding, come upon her when she had strayed from her own riding party, and had behaved with such unexpected circumspection and propriety, not to mention a certain thoughtful abstraction, — it was the day he had received Sophy's letter, — that she was constrained to make the first advances. This led to a later innocent rendezvous, in which Mrs. Camperly was impelled to confide to Mr. Hamlin the fact that her husband had really never understood her. Jack listened with an understanding and sympathy quickened by long experience of such confessions. If anything had ever kept him from marriage it was this evident incompatibility of the conjugal relations with a just conception of the feminine soul and its aspirations.

And so eventually this yearning for sympathy dragged Mrs. Camperly's clean skirts and rustic purity after Jack's heels into various places and various situations not so clean, rural, or innocent; made her miserably unhappy in his absence, and still more miserably happy in his presence; impelled her to lie, cheat, and bear false witness; forced her to listen with mingled shame and admiration to narrow criticism of his faults, from natures so palpably inferior to his own that her moral sense was confused and shaken; gave her two distinct lives, but so unreal and feverish that, with a recklessness equal to his own, she was at last ready to merge them both into his. For the first time in his life Mr. Hamlin found himself bored at the beginning of an affair, actually hesitated, and suddenly disappeared from San Francisco.

He turned up a few days later at Aunt Chloe's door, with various packages of presents and quite the air of a returning father of a family, to the intense delight of that lady and to Sophy's proud gratification. For he was lost in a profuse, boyish admiration of her pretty studio, and in wholesome reverence for her art and her astounding progress. They were also amused at his awe and evident alarm at the portraits of two ladies, her latest sitters, that were still on the easels, and, in consideration of his half-assumed, half-real bashfulness, they turned their faces to the wall. Then his quick, observant eye detected a photograph of himself on the mantel.

"What's that?" he asked suddenly.

Sophy and Aunt Chloe exchanged meaning glances. Sophy had, as a surprise to Jack, just completed a handsome crayon portrait of himself from an old photograph furnished by Hannibal, and the picture was at that moment in the window of her former patron, — the photographer.

"Oh, dat! Miss Sophy jus' put it dar fo' de lady sitters to look at to gib 'em a pleasant 'spresshion," said Aunt Chloe, chuckling.

Mr. Hamlin did not laugh, but quietly slipped the photograph into his pocket. Yet, perhaps, it had not been recognized.

Then Sophy proposed to have luncheon in the studio; it was quite "Bohemian" and fashionable, and many artists did it. But to her great surprise Jack gravely objected, preferring the little parlor of Aunt Chloe, the vine-fringed windows, and the heavy respectable furniture. He thought it was profaning the studio, and then — anybody might come in. This unusual circumspection amused them, and was believed to be part of the boyish awe with which Jack regarded the models, the draperies, and the studies on the walls. Certain it was that he was much more at his ease in the parlor, and when he and Sophy were once more alone at their meal, although he ate nothing, he had regained all his old naïveté. Presently he leaned forward and placed his hand fraternally on her arm. Sophy looked up with an equally frank smile.

"You know I promised to let bygones be bygones, eh? Well, I intended it, and more, — I intended to make 'em so. I told you I'd never speak to you again of that man who tried to run you off, and I intended that no one else should. Well, as he was the only one who could talk — that meant him. But the cards are out of my hands; the game 's been played without me. For he 's dead!"

The girl started. Mr. Hamlin's hand passed caressingly twice or thrice along her sleeve with a peculiar gentleness that seemed to magnetize her.

"Dead," he repeated slowly. "Shot in San Diego by another man, but not by me. I had him tracked as far as that, and had my eyes on him, but it was n't my deal. But there," he added, giving her magnetized arm a gentle and final tap as if to awaken it, "he 's dead, and so is the whole story. And now we 'll drop it forever."

The girl's downcast eyes were fixed on the table.

"But there 's my sister," she murmured.

"Did she know you went with him?" asked Jack.

"No; but she knows I ran away."

"Well, you ran away from home to study how to be an artist, don't you see? Some day she 'll find out you *are one*; that settles the whole thing."

They were both quite cheerful again when Aunt Chloe returned to clear the table, especially Jack, who was in the best spirits, with preternaturally bright eyes and a somewhat rare color on his cheeks. Aunt Chloe, who had noticed that his breathing was hurried at times, watched him narrowly, and when later he slipped from the room, followed him into the passage. He was leaning against the wall. In an instant the negress was at his side.

"De Lawdy Gawd, Marse Jack, not *agin?*"

He took his handkerchief, slightly streaked with blood, from his lips and said faintly, "Yes, it came on — on the boat; but I thought the d—d thing was over. Get me out of this, quick, to some hotel, before she knows it. You can tell her I was called away. Say that" — but his breath failed him, and when Aunt Chloe caught him like a child in her strong arms he could make no resistance.

In another hour he was unconscious, with two doctors at his bedside, in the little room that had been occupied by Sophy. It was a sharp attack, but prompt attendance and skillful nursing availed; he rallied the next day, but it would be weeks, the doctors said, before he could be removed in safety. Sophy was transferred to the parlor, but spent most of her time at Jack's bedside with Aunt Chloe, or in the studio with the door open between it and the bedroom. In spite of his enforced idleness and weakness, it was again a singularly pleasant experience to Jack; it amused him to sometimes see Sophy at her work through the open door, and when sitters came, — for he had insisted on her continuing her duties as before, keeping his invalid presence in the house a secret, — he had all the satisfaction of a mischievous boy in rehearsing to Sophy such of the conversation as could be overheard through the closed door, and speculating on the possible wonder and chagrin of the sitters had they discovered him. Even when he was convalescent and strong enough to be helped into the parlor and garden, he preferred to remain propped up in Sophy's little bedroom. It was evident, however, that this predilection was connected with no suggestion nor reminiscence of Sophy herself. It was true that he had once asked her if it did n't make her "feel like home." The decided negative from Sophy seemed to mildly surprise him. "That 's odd," he said; "now all these fixings and things," pointing to the flowers in a vase, the little hanging shelf of books, the knickknacks on the mantel-shelf, and the few feminine ornaments that still remained, "look rather like home to me."

So the days slipped by, and although Mr. Hamlin was soon able to walk short distances, leaning on Sophy's arm, in the evening twilight, along the river bank, he was still missed from the haunts of dissipated men. A good many people wondered, and others, chiefly of the more irrepressible sex, were singularly concerned. Apparently one of these, one sultry afternoon, stopped before the shadowed window of a photographer's; she was a handsome, well-dressed woman, yet bearing a certain country-like simplicity that was unlike the restless smartness of the more urban promenaders who passed her. Nevertheless she had halted before Mr. Hamlin's picture, which Sophy had not yet dared to bring home and present to him, and was gazing at it with rapt and breathless attention. Suddenly she shook down her veil and entered the shop. Could the proprietor kindly tell her if that portrait was the work of a local artist?

The proprietor was both proud and pleased to say that *it was!* It was the work of a Miss Brown, a young girl student; in fact, a mere schoolgirl, one might say. He could show her others of her pictures.

Thanks. But could he tell her if this portrait was from life?

No doubt; the young lady had a studio, and he himself had sent her sitters.

And perhaps this was the portrait of one that he had sent her?

No; but she was very popular and becoming quite the fashion. Very probably this gentleman, who, he understood, was quite a public character, had heard of her, and selected her on that account.

The lady's face flushed slightly. The photographer continued. The picture was not for sale; it was only there on exhibition; in fact it was to be returned to-morrow.

To the sitter?

He could n't say. It was to go back to the studio. Perhaps the sitter would be there.

And this studio? Could she have its address?

The man wrote a few lines on his card. Perhaps the lady would be kind enough to say that he had sent her. The lady, thanking him, partly lifted her veil to show a charming smile, and gracefully withdrew. The photographer was pleased. Miss Brown had evidently got another sitter, and, from that momentary glimpse of her face, it would be a picture as beautiful and attractive as the man's. But what was the odd idea that struck him? She certainly reminded him of some one! There was the same heavy hair, only this lady's was golden, and she was older and more mature. And he remained for a moment with knitted brows musing over his counter.

Meantime the fair stranger was making her way towards the river suburb. When she reached Aunt Chloe's cottage, she paused, with the unfamiliar curiosity of a new-comer, over its quaint and incongruous exterior. She hesitated a moment also when Aunt Chloe appeared in the doorway, and, with a puzzled survey of her features, went upstairs to announce a visitor. There was the sound of hurried shutting of doors, of the moving of furniture, quick footsteps across the floor, and then a girlish laugh that startled her. She ascended the stairs breathlessly to Aunt Chloe's summons, found the negress on the landing, and knocked at a door which bore a card marked "Studio." The door opened; she entered; there were two sudden outcries that might have come from one voice.

"Sophonisba!"

"Marianne!"

"Hush."

The woman had seized Sophy by the wrist and dragged her to the window. There was a haggard look of desperation in her face akin to that which Hamlin had once seen in her sister's eyes on the boat, as she said huskily: "I did not know *you* were here. I came to see the woman who had painted Mr. Hamlin's portrait. I did not know it was *you*. Listen! Quick! answer me one question. Tell me — I implore you — for the sake of the mother who bore us both! — tell me — is this the man for whom you left home?"

"No! No! A hundred times no!"

Then there was a silence. Mr. Hamlin from the bedroom heard no more.

An hour later, when the two women opened the studio door, pale but composed, they were met by the anxious and tearful face of Aunt Chloe.

"Lawdy Gawd, Missy, — but dey done gone! — bofe of 'em!"

"Who is gone?" demanded Sophy, as the woman beside her trembled and grew paler still.

"Marse Jack and dat fool nigger, Hannibal."

"Mr. Hamlin gone?" repeated Sophy incredulously. "When? Where?"

"Jess now — on de down boat. Sudden business. Did n't like to disturb yo' and yo' friend. Said he 'd write."

"But he was ill — almost helpless," gasped Sophy.

"Dat 's why he took dat old nigger. Lawdy, Missy, bress yo' heart. Dey both knows aich udder, shuah! It 's all right. Dar now, dar dey are; listen."

She held up her hand. A slow pulsation, that might have been the dull, labored beating of their own hearts, was making itself felt throughout the little cottage. It came nearer, — a deep regular inspiration that seemed slowly to fill and possess the whole tranquil summer twilight. It was nearer still — was abreast of the house — passed — grew fainter — and at last died away like a deep-drawn sigh. It was the down boat, that was now separating Mr. Hamlin and his protégée, even as it had once brought them together.

THE REFORMATION OF JAMES REDDY

I

It was a freshly furrowed field, so large that the eye at first scarcely took in its magnitude. The irregular surface of upturned, oily, wave-shaped clods took the appearance of a vast, black, chopping sea, that reached from the actual shore of San Francisco Bay to the low hills of the Coast Range. The sea-breeze that blew chilly over this bleak expanse added to that fancy, and the line of straggling whitewashed farm buildings, that halfway across lifted themselves above it, seemed to be placed on an island in its midst. Even the one or two huge, misshapen agricultural machines, abandoned in the furrows, bore an odd resemblance to hulks or barges adrift upon its waste.

This marine suggestion was equally noticeable from the door of one of the farm buildings — a long, detached wooden shed — into which a number of farm laborers were slowly filing, although one man was apparently enough impressed by it to linger and gaze over that rigid sea. Except in their rough dress and the labor-stains of soil on their hands and faces, they represented no particular type or class. They were young and old, robust and delicate, dull and intelligent; kept together only by some philosophical, careless, or humorous acceptance of equally enforced circumstance in their labors, as convicts might have been. For they had been picked up on the streets and wharves of San Francisco, — discharged sailors, broken-down miners, helpless new-comers, unemployed professional men, and ruined traders, — to assist in ploughing and planting certain broad leagues of rich alluvial soil for a speculative Joint Stock Company, at a weekly wage that would have made a European peasant independent for half a year. Yet there was no enthusiasm in their labor, although it was seldom marked by absolute laziness or evasion, and was more often hindered by ill-regulated "spurts" and excessive effort, as if the laborer was anxious to get through with it; for in the few confidences they exchanged there was little allusion to the present, and they talked chiefly of what they were going to do when their work was over. They were gregarious only at their meals in one of the sheds, or when at night they sought their bunks or berths together in the larger building.

The man who had lingered to look at the dreary prospect had a somewhat gloomy, discontented face, whose sensitive lines indicated a certain susceptibility to such impressions. He was further distinguished by having also lingered longer with the washing of his hands and face in the battered tin basin on a stool beside the door, and by the circumstance that the operation revealed the fact that they were whiter than those of his companions. Drying his fingers slowly on the long roller-towel, he stood gazing with a kind of hard abstraction across the darkening field, the strip of faded colorless shore, and the chill gray sea, to the dividing point of land on the opposite coast, which in the dying daylight was silhouetted against the cold horizon.

He knew that around that point and behind it lay the fierce, half-grown, half-tamed city of yesterday that had worked his ruin. It was scarcely a year ago that he had plunged into its wildest excesses, — a reckless gambler among speculators, a hopeless speculator among gamblers, — until the little fortune he had brought thither had been swept away.

From time to time he had kept up his failing spirit with the feverish exaltation of dissipation, until, awakening from a drunkard's dream one morning, he had found himself on board a steamboat crossing the bay, in company with a gang of farm laborers with whom he was hired. A bitter smile crossed his lips as his eyes hovered over the cold, rugged fields before him. Yet he knew that they had saved him. The unaccustomed manual labor in the open air, the regular hours, the silent, heavy, passionless nights, the plain but wholesome food, were all slowly restoring his youth and strength again. Temptation and passion had alike fled these unlovely fields and this grim employment. Yet he was not grateful. He nursed his dreary convalescence as he had his previous dissipation, as part of a wrong done him by one for whose sake, he was wont to believe, he had sacrificed himself. That person was a woman.

Turning at last from the prospect and his bitter memories to join his companions, he found that they had all passed in. The benches before the long table on which supper was spread were already filled, and he stood in hesitation, looking down the line of silent and hungrily preoccupied men on either side. A young girl, who was standing near a smaller serving-table, apparently assisting an older woman in directing the operation of half a dozen Chinese waiters, moved forward and cleared a place for him at a side-table, pushing before it the only chair in the room, — the one she had lately vacated. As she placed some of the dishes before him with a timid ostentation, and her large but well-shaped hands came suddenly in contact with, and in direct contrast to his own whiter and more delicate ones, she blushed faintly. He lifted his eyes to hers.

He had seen her half a dozen times before, for she was the daughter of the ranch superintendent, and occasionally assisted her mother in this culinary supervision — which did not, however, bring her into any familiar association with the men. Even the younger ones, perhaps from overconsciousness of their inferior position or the preoccupation of their labor, never indulged in any gallantry toward her, and he himself, in his revulsion of feeling against the whole sex, had scarcely noticed that she was good-looking. But this naïve exhibition of preference could not be overlooked, either by his companions, who smiled cynically across the table, or by himself, from whose morbid fancy it struck an ignoble suggestion. Ah, well! the girl was pretty — the daughter of his employer, who, rumor said, owned a controlling share in the company; why should he not make this chance preference lead to something, if only to ameliorate, in ways like this, his despicable position here. He knew the value of his own good looks, his superior education, and a certain recklessness which women liked; why should he not profit by them as well as the one woman who had brought him to this? He owed her sex nothing; if those among them who were not bad were only fools, there was no reason why he should not deceive them as they had him. There was all this small audacity and cynical purpose in his brown eyes as he deliberately fixed them on hers. And I grieve to say that these abominable sentiments seemed only to impart to them a certain attractive brilliancy, and a determination which the undetermining sex is apt to admire.

She blushed again, dropped her eyes, replied to his significant thanks with a few indistinct words, and drew away from the table with a sudden timidity that was half confession.

She did not approach him again during the meal, but seemed to have taken a sudden interest in the efficiency of the waiters generally, which she had not shown before. I do not know whether this was merely an effort at concealment, or an awakened recognition of her duty; but, after the fashion of her sex, — and perhaps in contrast to his, — she was kinder that evening to the average man on account of *him*. He did not, however, notice it; nor did her absence interfere with his now healthy appetite; he finished his meal, and only when he rose to take his hat from the peg above him did he glance around the room. Their eyes met again. As he passed out, although it was dark, he put on his hat a little more smartly.

The air was clear and cold, but the outlines of the landscape had vanished. His companions, with the instinct of tired animals, were already making their way in knots of two or three, or in silent file, across the intervening space between the building and their dormitory. A few had already lit their pipes and were walking leisurely, but the majority were hurrying from the chill sea-breeze to the warmth and comfort of the long, well-lit room, lined with blanketed berths, and set with plain wooden chairs and tables. The young man lingered for a moment on the wooden platform outside the dining-shed, — partly to evade this only social gathering of his fellows as they retired for the night, and partly attracted by a strange fascination to the faint distant glow, beyond the point of land, which indicated the lights of San Francisco.

There was a slight rustle behind him! It was the young girl who, with a white woolen scarf thrown over her head and shoulders, had just left the room. She started when she saw him, and for an instant hesitated.

"You are going home, Miss Woodridge?" he said pleasantly.

"Yes," she returned, in a faint, embarrassed voice. "I thought I'd run on ahead of ma."

"Will you allow me to accompany you?"

"It's only a step," she protested, indicating the light in the window of the superintendent's house, — the most remote of the group of buildings, yet scarcely a quarter of a mile distant.

"But it's quite dark," he persisted smilingly.

She stepped from the platform to the ground; he instantly followed and ranged himself at a little distance from her side. She protested still feebly against his "troubling himself," but in another moment they were walking on quietly together. Nevertheless, a few paces from the platform they came upon the upheaved clods of the fresh furrows, and their progress over them was slow and difficult.

"Shall I help you? Will you take my arm?" he said politely.

"No, thank you, Mr. Reddy."

So! she knew his name! He tried to look into her eyes, but the woolen scarf hid her head. After all, there was nothing strange in her knowing him; she probably had the names of the men before her in the dining-room, or on the books. After a pause he said: —

"You quite startled me. One becomes such a mere working machine here that one quite forgets one's own name, — especially with the prefix of 'Mr.'

"And if it don't happen to be one's real name either," said the girl, with an odd, timid audacity.

He looked up quickly — more attracted by her manner than her words; more amused than angry.

"But Reddy happens to be my real name."

"Oh!"

"What made you think it was not?"

The clods over which they were clambering were so uneven that sometimes the young girl was mounting one at the same moment that Reddy was descending from another. Her reply, half muffled in her shawl, was delivered over his head. "Oh, because pa says most of the men here don't give their real names — they don't care to be known afterward. Ashamed of their work, I reckon."

His face flushed a moment, even in the darkness. He *was* ashamed of his work, and perhaps a little of the pitiful sport he was beginning. But oddly enough, the aggressive criticism only whetted his purpose. The girl was evidently quite able to take care of herself; why should he be over-chivalrous?

"It is n't very pleasant to be doing the work of a horse, an ox, or a machine, if you can do other things," he said half seriously.

"But you never used to do anything at all, did you?" she asked.

He hesitated. Here was a chance to give her an affecting history of his former exalted fortune and position, and perhaps even to stir her evidently romantic nature with some suggestion of his sacrifices to one of her own sex. Women liked that sort of thing. It aroused at once their emulation and their condemnation of each other. He seized the opportunity, but — for some reason, he knew not why — awkwardly and clumsily, with a simulated pathos that was lachrymose, a self-assertion that was boastful, and a dramatic manner that was unreal. Suddenly the girl stopped him.

"Yes, I know all *that*; pa told me. Told me you 'd been given away by some woman."

His face again flushed — this time with anger. The utter failure of his story to excite her interest, and her perfect possession of herself and the situation, — so unlike her conduct a few moments before, — made him savagely silent, and he clambered on sullenly at her side. Presently she stopped, balancing herself with a dexterity he could not imitate on one of the larger upheaved clods, and said: —

"I was thinking that, as you can't do much with those hands of yours, digging and shoveling, and not much with your feet either, over ploughed ground, you might do some inside work, that would pay you better, too. You might help in the dining-room, setting table and washing up, helping ma and me — though *I* don't do much except overseeing. I could show you what to do at first, and you 'd learn quick enough. If you say 'yes,' I 'll speak to pa to-night. He 'll do whatever I say."

The rage and shame that filled his breast choked even the bitter laugh that first rose to his lips. If he could have turned on his heel and left her with marked indignation, he would have done so, but they were scarcely halfway across the field; his stumbling retreat would have only appeared ridiculous, and he was by no means sure that she would not have looked upon it as merely a confession of his inability to keep up with her. And yet there was something peculiarly fascinating and tantalizing in the situation. She did not see the sardonic glitter in his eye as he said brutally: —

"Ha! and that would give me the exquisite pleasure of being near you."

She seemed a little confused, even under her enwrappings, and in stepping down her foot slipped. Reddy instantly scrambled up to her and caught her as she was pitching forward into the furrow. Yet in the struggle to keep his own foothold he was aware that she was assisting him, and although he had passed his arm around her waist, as if for her better security, it was only through *her* firm grasp of his wrists that he regained his own footing. The "cloud" had fallen back from her head and shoulders, her heavy hair had brushed his cheek and left its faint odor in his nostrils; the rounded outline of her figure had been slightly drawn against his own. His mean resentment wavered; her proposition, which at first seemed only insulting, now took a vague form of satisfaction; his ironical suggestion seemed a natural expression.

"Well, I say 'yes' then," he said, with an affected laugh. "That is, if you think I can manage to do the work; it is not exactly in my line, you know." Yet he somehow felt that his laugh was feeble and unconvincing.

"Oh, it 's easy enough," said the girl quietly. "You 've only got to be clean — and that 's in your line, I should say."

"And if I thought it would please you," he added, with another attempt at gallantry.

She did not reply, but moved steadily on, he fancied a little more rapidly. They were nearing the house; he felt he was losing time and opportunity. The uneven nature of the ground kept him from walking immediately beside her, unless he held her hand or arm. Yet an odd timidity was overtaking him. Surely this was the same girl whose consciousness and susceptibility were so apparent a moment ago; yet her speech had been inconsistent, unsympathetic, and coldly practical.

"It 's very kind of you," he began again, scrambling up one side of the furrow as she descended on the other, "to — to — take such an interest in — in a stranger, and I wish you knew how" (she had mounted the ridge again, and stood balancing herself as if waiting for him to finish his sentence) "how — how deeply — I — I" — She dropped quickly down again with the same movement of uneasy consciousness, and he left the sentence unfinished. The house was now only a few yards away; he hurried forward, but she reached the wooden platform and stoop upon it first. He, however, at the same moment caught her hand.

"I want to thank you," he said, "and say good-night."

"Good-night." Her voice was indistinct again, and she was trembling. Emboldened and reckless, he sprang upon the platform, and encircling her with one arm, with his other hand he unloosed the woolen cloud around her head and bared her faintly flushed cheek and half-open, hurriedly breathing lips. But the next moment she threw her head back with a single powerful movement, and, as it seemed to him, with scarcely an effort cast him off with both hands, and sent him toppling from the platform to the ground. He scrambled quickly to his feet again, flushed, angry, and — frightened! Perhaps she would call her father; he would be insulted, or worse, — laughed at! He had lost even this pitiful chance of bettering his condition. But he was as relieved as he was surprised to see that she was standing quietly on the edge of the platform, apparently waiting for him to rise. Her face was still uncovered, still slightly flushed, but bearing no trace of either insult or anger. When he stood erect again, she looked at him gravely and drew the woolen cloud over her head, as she said calmly, "Then I'll tell pa you'll take the place, and I reckon you'll begin to-morrow morning."

II

Angered, discomfited, and physically and morally beaten, James Reddy stumbled and clambered back across the field. The beam of light that had streamed out over the dark field as the door opened and shut on the girl left him doubly confused and bewildered. In his dull anger and mortification, there seemed only one course for him to pursue. He would demand his wages in the morning, and cut the whole concern. He would go back to San Francisco and work there, where he at least had friends who respected his station. Yet he ought to have refused the girl's offer before she had repulsed him; his retreat now meant nothing, and might even tempt her, in her vulgar pique, to reveal her rebuff of him. He raised his eyes mechanically, and looked gloomily across the dark waste and distant bay to the opposite shore. But the fog had already hidden the glow of the city's lights, and, thickening around the horizon, seemed to be slowly hemming him in with the dreary rancho. In his present frame of mind there was a certain fatefulness in this that precluded his once free agency, and to that extent relieved and absolved *him* of any choice. He reached the dormitory and its turned-down lights in a state of tired and dull uncertainty, for which sleep seemed to offer the only relief. He rolled himself in his blanket, with an animal instinct of comfort, and shut his eyes, but their sense appeared to open upon Nelly Woodridge as she stood looking down upon him from the platform. Even through the dull pain of his bruised susceptibilities he was conscious of a strange satisfaction he had not felt before. He fell asleep at last, to waken only to the sunlight streaming through the curtainless windows on his face. To his surprise the long shed was empty and deserted, except for a single Chinaman who was sweeping the floor at the farther end. As Reddy started up, the man turned and approached him with a characteristic, vague, and patient smile.

"All lity, John, you sleepee heap! Mistel Woodlidge he say you no go wolkee field allee same Mellican man. You stoppee inside housee allee same *me*. Shabbee? You come to glubbee [grub] now" (pointing to the distant dining-shed), "and then you washee dish."

The full extent of his new degradation flashed upon Reddy with this added insult of his brother menial's implicit equality. He understood it all. He had been detached from the field-workers and was to come to a later breakfast, perhaps the broken victuals of the first repast, and wash the dishes. He remembered his new bargain. Very well! he would refuse positively, take his dismissal, and leave that morning! He hurriedly dressed himself, and followed the Chinaman into the open air.

The fog still hung upon the distant bay and hid the opposite point. But the sun shone with dry Californian brilliancy over the league-long field around him, revealing every detail of the rancho with sharp, matter-of-fact directness, and without the least illusion of distance or romance. The rough, unplaned, unpainted walls of the dinner-shed stood out clearly before him; the half-filled buckets of water on the near platform, and the immense tubs piled with dirty dishes. He scowled darkly as he walked forward, conscious, nevertheless, of the invigorating discipline of the morning air and the wholesome whip in the sky above him. He entered sharply and aggressively. To his relief, the room at first sight seemed, like the dormitory he had just left, to be empty. But a voice, clear, dry, direct, and practical as the morning itself, spoke in his ear: —

"Mornin', Reddy! My daughter says you 're willin' to take an indoor job, and I reckon, speakin' square, as man to man, it 's more in your line than what you 've bin doin'. It may n't be high-toned work, but work 's *work* anyhow you can fix it; and the only difference I kin see is in the work that a man does squarely and the work that he shirks."

"But," said Reddy hurriedly, "there 's a mistake. I came here only to" —

"Work like the others, I understand. Well, you see you *can't*. You do your best, I know. I ain't findin' fault, but it ain't in your line. *This* is, and the pay is better."

"But," stammered Reddy, "Miss Woodridge did n't understand" —

"Yes, she did," returned Woodridge impatiently, "and she told me. She says she 'll show you round at first. You 'll catch on all right. Sit down and eat your breakfast, and she 'll be along before you 're through. Ez for *me*, I must get up and get. So long!" and before Reddy had an opportunity to continue his protest, he turned away.

The young man glanced vexatiously around him. A breakfast much better in service and quality than the one he had been accustomed to smoked on the table. There was no one else in the room. He could hear the voices of the Chinese waiters in the kitchen beyond. He was healthily hungry, and after a moment's hesitation sat down and began his meal. He could expostulate with her afterward, and withdraw his promise. He was entitled to his breakfast, anyway!

Once or twice, while thus engaged, he heard the door of the kitchen open and the clipping tread of the Chinese waiters, who deposited some rattling burden on the adjacent tables, but he thought it prudent not to seem to notice them. When he had finished, the pleasant, hesitating, boyish contralto of Miss Woodridge fell upon his ear.

"When you 're ready, I 'll show you how to begin your work."

He turned quickly, with a flush of mortification at being discovered at his repast, and his anger returned. But as his eyes fell upon her delicately colored but tranquil face, her well-shaped figure, coquettishly and spotlessly cuffed, collared, and aproned, and her clear blue but half-averted eyes, he again underwent a change. She certainly was very pretty — that most seductive prettiness which seemed to be warmed into life by her consciousness of himself. Why should he take her or himself so seriously? Why not play out the farce, and let those who would criticise him and think his acceptance of the work degrading understand that it was only an affair of gallantry. He could afford to serve Woodridge at least a few weeks for the favor of this Rachel! Forgetful of his rebuff of the night before, he fixed his brown eyes on hers with an audacious levity.

"Oh, yes — the work! Let us see it. I 'm ready in name and nature for anything that Miss Woodridge wants of me. I 'm just dying to begin."

His voice was raised slightly, with a high comedy jauntiness, for the benefit of the Chinese waiters who might be lingering to see the "Mellican man" assume their functions. But it failed in effect. With their characteristic calm acceptance of any eccentricity in a "foreign devil," they scarcely lifted their eyes. The young girl pointed to a deep basket filled with dishes which had been placed on the larger table, and said, without looking at Reddy: —

"You had better begin by 'checking' the crockery;

that is, counting the pieces separately and then arranging them in sets as they come back from washing. There 's the book to compare them with and to set down what is broken, missing, or chipped. You 'll have a clean towel with you to wipe the pieces that have not been cleaned enough ; or, if they are too dirty, you 'll send them back to the kitchen."

"Could n't I wash them myself ?" said Reddy, continuing his ostentatious levity.

"Not yet," said the girl, with grave hesitation ; "you 'd break them."

She stood watching him, as with affected hilarity he began to take the dishes from the basket. But she noticed that in spite of this jocular simulation his grasp was firm and delicate, and that there was no clatter — which would have affected her sensitive ear — as he put them down. She laid a pencil and account book beside him and turned away.

"But you are not going ?" he said, in genuine surprise.

"Yes," she said quietly, "until you get through 'checking.' Then I 'll come back and show you what you have to do next. You 're getting on very well."

"But that was because you were with me."

She colored slightly and, without looking at him, moved slowly to the door and disappeared.

Reddy went back to his work, disappointed but not discomfited. He was getting accustomed to the girl's eccentricities. Whether it was the freshness of the morning air and sunlight streaming in at the open windows, the unlooked-for solitude and security of the empty room, or that there was nothing really unpleasant in his occupation, he went on cheerfully "checking" the dishes, narrowly examining them for chips and cracks, and noting them in the book. Again discovering that a few were imperfectly cleaned and wiped, he repaired the defect with cold water and a towel without the least thought of the operation being degrading. He had finished his task in half an hour; she had not returned; why should he not go on and set the table? As he straightened and turned the coarse tablecloth, he made the discovery that the long table was really composed of half a dozen smaller ones, and that the hideous parallelogram which had always so offended him was merely the outcome of carelessness and want of taste. Without a moment's hesitation he set at work to break up the monotonous line and rearranged the tables laterally, with small open spaces between them. The task was no light one, even for a stronger man, but he persevered in it with a new-found energy until he had changed the whole aspect of the room. It looked larger, wider, and less crowded; its hard, practical, workhouse-like formality had disappeared. He had paused to survey it, panting still with his unusual exertion, when a voice broke upon his solitude.

"Well, I wanter know!"

The voice was not Nelly's, but that of her mother, — a large-boned, angular woman of fifty, — who had entered the room unperceived. The accents were simply those of surprise, but on James Reddy's present sensitive mood, coupled with the feeling that here was a new witness to his degradation, he might have resented it; but he detected the handsome, reserved figure of the daughter a few steps behind her. Their eyes met; wonderful to relate, the young girl's no longer evaded him, but looked squarely into his with a bright expression of pleasure he had not seen before. He checked himself with a sudden thrill of gratification.

"Well, I declare," continued Mrs. Woodridge; "is that *your* idea — or yours, Helen?"

Here Reddy simply pointed out the advantages for serving afforded by the new arrangement; that all the tables were equally and quickly accessible from the serving-table

SHE STOOD WATCHING HIM

and sideboard, and that it was no longer necessary to go the whole length of the room to serve the upper table. He tactfully did not refer to the improved appearance of the room.

"Well, as long as it ain't mere finikin'," said the lady graciously, "and seems to bring the folks and their vittles nearer together — we 'll try it to-day. It does look kinder *cityfied* — and I reckoned that was all the good it was. But I calkilated you were goin' to check the crockery this morning."

"It 's done," said Reddy, smilingly handing her the account-book.

Mrs. Woodridge glanced over it, and then surveyed her new assistant.

"And you did n't find any plates that were dirty and that had to be sent back ?"

"Yes, two or three, but I cleaned them myself."

Mrs. Woodridge glanced at him with a look of approving curiosity, but his eyes were just then seeking her daughter's for a more grateful sympathy. All of which the good lady noted, and as it apparently answered the unasked question in her own mind, she only uttered the single exclamation "Humph ! "

But the approbation he received later at dinner, in the satisfaction of his old companions with the new arrangement, had also the effect of diverting from him the criticism he had feared they would make in finding him installed as an assistant to Mrs. Woodridge. On the contrary, they appeared only to recognize in him some especial and superior faculty utilized for their comfort, and when the superintendent, equally pleased, said it was "all Reddy's own idea," no one doubted that it was this particular stroke of genius which had gained him the obvious promotion. If he had still thought of offering his flirtation with Nelly as an excuse, there was now no necessity for any. Having shown to his employers his capacity for the highest and lowest work, they naturally preferred to use his best abilities — and he was kept from any menial service. His accounts were so carefully and intelligently rendered that the entire care of the building and its appointments was intrusted to him. At the end of the week Mr. Woodridge took him aside.

"I say, you ain't got any job in view arter you finish up here, hev ye?"

Reddy started. Scarcely ten days ago he had a hundred projects, schemes, and speculations, more or less wild and extravagant, wherewith he was to avenge and recoup himself in San Francisco. Now they were gone — he knew not where and how. He briefly said he had not.

"Because," continued Woodridge, "I 've got an idea of startin' a hotel in the Oak Grove, just on the slope back o' the rancho. The company 's bound to make some sort o' settlement there for the regular hands, and the place is pooty enough for 'Frisco people who want to run over here and get set up for a day or two. Thar 's plenty of wood and water up thar, and the company 's sure to have a wharf down on the shore. I 'll provide the capital, if you will put in your time. You can sling in ez much style as you like there" (this was an allusion to Reddy's attempt to enliven the blank walls with colored pictures from the illustrated papers and green ceanothus sprays from the slope); "in fact, the more style the better for them city folks. Well, you think it over."

He did. But meantime he seemed to make little progress in his court of the superintendent's daughter. He tried to think it was because he had allowed himself to be diverted by his work, but although she always betrayed the same odd physical consciousness of his presence, it was certain that she never encouraged him. She gave him the few directions that his new occupation still made necessary and looked her approval of his success. But nothing more. He was forced to admit that this was exactly what she might have done as the superintendent's daughter to a deserving employee. Whereat, for a few days he assumed an air of cold and ceremonious politeness, until perceiving that, far from piquing the girl, it seemed to gratify her, and even to render her less sensitive in his company, he sulked in good earnest. This proving ineffective also, — except to produce a kind of compassionate curiosity, — his former dull rage returned. The planting of the rancho was nearly over; his service would be ended next week; he had not yet given his answer to Woodridge's proposition; he would decline it and cut the whole concern!

It was a crisp Sunday morning. The breakfast hour was later on that day to allow the men more time for their holiday, which, however, they generally spent in cards, gossip, or reading in their sleeping-sheds. It usually delayed Reddy's work, but as he cared little for the companionship of his fellows, it enabled him, without a show of unsociability, to seclude himself in the dining-room. And this morning he was early approached by his employer.

"I 'm goin' to take the women folks over to Oakdale to church," said Mr. Woodridge; "ef ye keer to join us thar 's a seat in the wagon, and I 'll turn on a couple of Chinamen to do the work for you, just now; and Nelly or the old woman will give you a lift this afternoon with the counting up."

Reddy felt instinctively that the invitation had been instigated by the young girl. A week before he would have rejoiced at it; a month ago he would have accepted it if only as a relief to his degraded position, but in the pique of this new passion he almost rudely declined it. An hour later he saw Nelly, becomingly and even tastefully dressed, — with the American girl's triumphant superiority to her condition and surroundings, — ride past in her father's smart carryall. He was startled to see that she looked so like a lady. Then, with a new and jealous inconsistency, significant of the progress of his passion, he resolved to go to church too. She should see that he was not going to remain behind like a mere slave. He remembered that he had still certain remnants of his past finery in his trunk; he would array himself in them, walk to Oakdale, and make one of the congregation. He managed to change his clothes without attracting the attention of his fellows, and set out.

The air was pure but keen, with none of the languor of spring in its breath, although a few flowers were beginning to star the weedy wagon-tracked lane, and there was an awakening spice in the wayside southern-wood and myrtle. He felt invigorated, although it seemed only to whet his jealous pique. He hurried on without even glancing toward the distant coast-line of San Francisco or even thinking of it. The bitter memories of the past had been obliterated by the bitterness of the present. He no longer thought of "that woman;" even when he had threatened to himself to return to San Francisco he was vaguely conscious that it was not *she* who was again drawing him there, but Nelly who was driving him away.

The service was nearly over when he arrived at the chilly little corrugated-zinc church at Oakdale, but he slipped into one of the back seats. A few worshipers turned round to look at him. Among them were the daughters of a neighboring miller, who were slightly exercised over the unusual advent of a good-looking stranger with certain exterior signs of elegance. Their excitement was communicated by some mysterious instinct to their neighbor, Nelly Woodridge. She also turned and caught his eye. But to all appearances she not only showed no signs of her usual agitation at his presence, but did not seem to even recognize him. In the acerbity of his pique he was for a moment gratified at what he believed to be the expression of her wounded pride, but his uneasiness quickly returned, and at the conclusion of the service he slipped out of the church with one or two of the more restless in the congregation. As he passed through the aisle he heard the escort of the miller's daughters, in response to a whispered inquiry, say distinctly: "Only the head-waiter over at the company's rancho." Whatever hesitating idea Reddy might have had of waiting at the church door for the appearance of Nelly vanished before the brutal truth. His brow darkened, and with flushed cheeks he turned his back upon the building and plunged into the woods. This time there was no hesitation in his resolve; he would leave the rancho at the expiration of his engagement. Even in a higher occupation he felt he could never live down his reputation there.

In his morose abstraction he did not know how long or how aimlessly he had wandered among the mossy live-oaks, his head and shoulders often imperiled by the down-curving of some huge knotted limb; his feet straying blindly from the faint track over the thickly matted carpet of chickweed which hid their roots. But it was nearly an hour before he emerged upon a wide, open, wooded slope, and, from the distant view of field and shore, knew that he was at Oak Grove, the site of Woodridge's projected hotel. And there, surely, at a little distance, was the Woodridges' wagon and team tied up to a sapling, while the superintendent and his wife were slowly climbing the slope, and apparently examining the prospect. Without waiting to see if Nelly was with them, Reddy instantly turned to avoid meeting them. But he had not proceeded a hundred yards before he came upon that young lady, who had evidently strayed from the party, and who was now unconsciously advancing toward him. A rencontre was inevitable.

She started slightly, and then stopped, with all her old agitation and embarrassment. But, to his own surprise, he was also embarrassed and even tongue-tied.

She spoke first.

"You were at church. I did n't quite know you in — in — these clothes."

In her own finery she had undergone such a change to Reddy's consciousness that he, for the first time in their acquaintance, now addressed her as on his own level, and as if she had no understanding of his own feelings.

"Oh," he said, with easy bitterness, "*others* did, if you did not. They all detected the 'head-waiter' at the Union Company's rancho. Even if I had accepted your kindness in offering me a seat in your wagon it would have made no difference."

He was glad to put this construction on his previous refusal, for in the new relations which seemed to be established by their Sunday clothes he was obliged to soften the churlishness of that refusal also.

"I don't think you'd look nice setting the table in kid gloves," she said, glancing quickly at his finery as if accepting it as the real issue; "but you can wear what you like at other times. *I* never found fault with your working clothes."

There was such a pleasant suggestion in her emphasis that his ill humor softened. Her eyes wandered over the opposite grove, where her unconscious parents had just disappeared.

"Papa's very keen about the hotel," she continued, "and is going to have the workmen break ground to-morrow. He says he'll have it up in two months and ready to open, if he has to make the men work double time. When you're manager, you won't mind what folks say."

There was no excuse for his further hesitation. He must speak out, but he did it in a half-hearted way.

"But if I simply go away — *without* being manager — I won't hear their criticism either."

"What do you mean?" she said quickly.

"I've — I've been thinking of — of going back to San Francisco," he stammered awkwardly.

A slight flush of contemptuous indignation passed over her face, and gave it a strength and expression he had never seen there before.

"Oh, you've not reformed yet, then?" she said, under her scornful lashes.

"I don't understand you," he said, flushing.

"Father ought to have told you," she went on dryly, "that that woman has gone off to the Springs with her husband, and you won't see *her* at San Francisco."

"I don't know what you mean — and your father seems to take an unwarrantable interest in my affairs," said Reddy, with an anger that he was conscious, however, was half simulated.

"No more than he ought to, if he expects to trust you with all *his* affairs," said the girl shortly; "but you had better tell him you have changed your mind at once, before he makes any further calculations on your staying. He's just over the hill there, with mother."

She turned away coldly as she spoke, but moved slowly and in the direction of the hill, although she took a less direct trail than the one she had pointed to him. But he followed her, albeit still embarrassedly, and with that new sense of respect which had checked his former surliness. There was her strong, healthy, well-developed figure moving before him, but the modish gray dress seemed to give its pronounced outlines something of the dignity of a goddess. Even the firm hands had the distinguishment of character.

"You understand," he said apologetically, "that I mean no discourtesy to your father or his offer. And" — he hesitated — "neither is my reason what you would infer."

"Then what is it?" she asked, turning to him abruptly. "You know you have no other place when you leave here, nor any chance as good as the one father offers you. You are not fit for any other work, and you know it. You have no money to speculate with, nor can you get any. If you could, you would have never stayed here."

He could not evade the appalling truthfulness of her clear eyes. He knew it was no use to lie to her; she had evidently thoroughly informed herself regarding his past; more than that, she seemed to read his present thoughts. But not all of them! No! he could startle her still! It was desperate, but he had nothing now to lose. And she liked the truth, — she should have it!

"You are right," he said shortly; "these are not my reasons."

"Then what reason have you?"

"You!"

"Me?" she repeated incredulously, yet with a rising color.

"Yes, *you!* I cannot stay here, and have you look down upon me."

"I don't look down on you," she said simply, yet without the haste of repelling an unjust accusation. "Why should I? Mother and I have done the same work that you are doing, — if that's what you mean; and father, who is a man like yourself, helped us at first, until he could do other things better." She paused. "Perhaps you think so because *you* looked down on us when you first came here."

"But I did n't," said Reddy quickly.

"You did," said the young girl quietly. "That's why you acted toward me as you did the night you walked home with me. You would not have behaved in that way to any San Francisco young lady — and I'm not one of your — fast — *married women.*"

Reddy felt the hot blood mount to his cheek, and looked away.

"I was foolish and rude — and I think you punished me at the time," he stammered. "But you see I was right in saying you looked down on me," he concluded triumphantly.

This was at best a feeble sequitur, but the argument of the affections is not always logical. And it had its effect on the girl.

"I was n't thinking of *that*," she said; "it's that you don't know your own mind."

"If I said that I would stay and accept your father's offer, would you think that I did?" he asked quickly.

"I should wait and see what you actually *did* do," she replied.

"But if I stayed — and — and — if I told you that I stayed on *your* account — to be with you and near you only — would you think that a proof?" He spoke hesitatingly, for his lips were dry with a nervousness he had not known before.

"I might, if you told father you expected to be engaged on those terms. For it concerns *him* as much as me. And *he* engages you, and not I. Otherwise I'd think it was only your talk."

Reddy looked at her in astonishment. There was not the slightest trace of coyness, coquetry, or even raillery in her clear, honest eyes, and yet it would seem as if she had taken his proposition in its fullest sense as a matrimonial declaration, and actually referred him to her father. He was pleased, frightened, and utterly unprepared.

"But what would *you* say, Nelly?" He drew closer to her and held out both his hands. But she retreated a step and slipped her own behind her.

"Better see what father says first," she said quietly. "You may change your mind again and go back to San Francisco."

He was confused, and reddened again. But he had become accustomed to her ways; rather, perhaps, he had begun to recognize the quaint justice that underlay them, or, possibly, some better self of his own, that had been buried under bitterness and sloth, had struggled into life.

"But whatever he says," he returned eagerly, "cannot alter my feelings to *you*. It can only alter my position here, and you say you are above being influenced by that. Tell me, Nelly — dear Nelly! have you nothing to say to me, *as I am*, or is it only to your father's manager that you would speak?" His voice had an unmistakable ring of sincerity in it, and even startled him — half rascal as he was.

The young girl's clear, scrutinizing eyes softened; her red resolute lips trembled slightly and then parted, the upper one hovering a little to one side over her white teeth. It was Nelly's own peculiar smile, and its serious piquancy always thrilled him. But she drew a little farther back from his brightening eyes, her hands still curled behind her, and said, with the faintest coquettish toss of her head toward the hill: "If you want to see father, you 'd better hurry up."

With a sudden determination as new to him as it was incomprehensible, Reddy turned from her and struck forward in the direction of the hill. He was not quite sure what he was going for. Yet that he, who had only a moment before fully determined to leave the rancho and her, was now going to her father to demand her hand as a contingency of his remaining did not strike him as so extravagant and unexpected a dénouement as it was a difficult one. He was only concerned *how*, and in what way, he should approach him. In a moment of embarrassment he hesitated, turned, and looked behind him.

She was standing where he had left her, gazing after him, leaning forward with her hands still held behind her. Suddenly, as with an inspiration, she raised them both, carried them impetuously to her lips, blew him a dozen riotous kisses, and then, lowering her head like a colt, whisked her skirt behind her, and vanished in the cover.

III

It was only May, but the freshness of early summer already clothed the great fields of the rancho. The old resemblance to a sea was still there, more accented, perhaps, by the undulations of bluish-green grain that rolled from the actual shore-line to the foothills. The farm buildings were half submerged in this glowing tide of color and lost their uncouth angularity with their hidden rude foundations. The same sea-breeze blew chilly and steadily from the bay, yet softened and subdued by the fresh odors of leaf and flower. The outlying fringe of oaks were starred through their underbrush with anemones and dog-roses; there were lupines growing rankly in the open spaces, and along the gentle slopes of Oak Grove daisies were already scattered And, as if it were part of this vernal efflorescence, the eminence itself was crowned with that latest flower of progress and improvement, — the new Oak Grove Hotel!

Long, low, dazzling with white colonnades, verandas, and balconies which retained, however, enough of the dampness of recent creation to make them too cool for loungers, except at high noon, the hotel nevertheless had the charms of freshness, youth, and cleanliness. Reddy's fastidious neatness showed itself in all the appointments, from the mirrored and marbled bar-room, gilded parlors, and snowy dining-room, to the chintz and maple furnishing of the bedrooms above. Reddy's taste, too, had selected the pretty site; his good fortune had afterward discovered in an adjoining thicket a spring of blandly therapeutic qualities. A complaisant medical faculty of San Francisco attested to its merits; a sympathetic press advertised the excellence of the hotel; a novelty-seeking, fashionable circle — as yet without laws and blindly imitative — found the new hotel an admirable variation to the vulgar ordinary "across the bay" excursion, and an accepted excuse for a novel social dissipation. A number of distinguished people had already visited it; certain exclusive families had secured the best rooms; there were a score of pretty women to be seen in its parlors; there had already been a slight scandal. Nothing seemed wanting to insure its success.

Reddy was passing through the little wood where four months before he had parted from Nellie Woodridge to learn his fate from her father. He remembered that interview to which Nelly's wafted kiss had inspired him. He recalled to-day, as he had many times before, the singular complacency with which Mr. Woodridge had received his suit, as if it were a slight and unimportant detail of the business in hand, and how he had told him that Nelly and her mother were going to the "States" for a three months' visit, but that after her return, if they were both "still agreed," he, Woodridge, would make no objection. He remembered the slight shock which this announcement of Nelly's separation from him during his probationary labors had given him, and his sudden suspicion that he had been partly tricked of his preliminary intent to secure her company to solace him. But he had later satisfied himself that she knew nothing of her father's intentions at the time, and he was fain to content himself with a walk through the fields at her side the day she departed, and a single kiss — which left him cold. And now in a few days she would return to witness the successful fulfillment of his labors, and — reward him!

It was certainly a complacent prospect. He could look forward to a sensible, prosperous, respectable future. He had won back his good name, his fortune, and position, — not perhaps exactly in the way he had expected, — and he had stilled the wanton, foolish cravings of his passionate nature in the calm, virginal love of an honest, handsome girl who would make him a practical helpmeet, and a comfortable, trustworthy wife. He ought to be very happy. He had never known such perfect health before; he had lost his reckless habits; his handsome, nervous face had grown more placid and contented; his long curls had been conventionally clipped; he had gained flesh unmistakably, and the lower buttons of the slim waistcoat he had worn to church that memorable Sunday were too tight for comfort or looks. *He was* happy; yet as he glanced over the material spring landscape, full of practical health, blossom, and promise of fruition, it struck him that the breeze that blew over it was chilly, even if healthful; and he shivered slightly.

He reached the hotel, entered the office, glanced at the register, and passed through into his private room. He had been away for two days, and noticed with gratification that the influx of visitors was still increasing. His clerk followed into the room.

"There 's a lady in 56 who wanted to see you when you returned. She asked particularly for the manager."

"Who is she?"

"Don't know. It 's a Mrs. Merrydew, from Sacramento. Expecting her husband on the next steamer."

"Humph! You 'll have to be rather careful about these solitary married women. We don't want another scandal, you know."

"She asked for you by name, sir, and I thought you might know her," returned the clerk.

"Very well. I 'll go up."

He sent a waiter ahead to announce him, and leisurely mounted the stairs. No. 56 was the sitting-room of a private suite on the first floor. The waiter was holding the door open. As he approached it a faint perfume from the interior made him turn pale. But he recovered his presence of mind sufficiently to close the door sharply upon the waiter behind him.

"Jim," said a voice which thrilled him.

He looked up and beheld what any astute reader of romance will have already suspected, — the woman to whom he believed he owed his ruin in San Francisco. She was as beautiful and alluring as ever, albeit she was thinner and more spiritual than he had ever seen her. She was tastefully dressed, as she had always been; a certain style of languorous silken déshabillé which she was wont to affect in better health now became her paler cheek and feverishly brilliant eyes. There was the same opulence of lace and ornament, and, whether by accident or design, clasped around the slight wrist of her extended hand was a bracelet which he remembered had swept away the last dregs of his fortune.

He took her hand mechanically, yet knowing, whatever rage was in his heart, he had not the strength to refuse it.

"They told me it was Mrs. Merrydew," he stammered.

"That was my mother's name," she said, with a little laugh. "I thought you knew it. But perhaps you did n't. When I got my divorce from Dick — you did n't know that either, I suppose; it 's three months ago — I did n't care to take my maiden name again; too many people remembered it. So after the decree was made I called myself Mrs. Merrydew. You had disappeared. They said you had gone East."

"But the clerk says you are expecting your *husband* on the steamer. What does this mean? Why did you tell him that?"

He had so far collected himself that there was a ring of inquisition in his voice.

"Oh, I had to give him some kind of reason for my being alone when I did not find you as I expected," she said half wearily. Then a change came over her tired face; a smile of mingled audacity and tentative coquetry lit up the small features. "Perhaps it is true; perhaps I may have a husband coming on the steamer — that depends. Sit down, Jim."

She let his hand drop, and pointed to an armchair from which she had just risen, and sank down herself in a corner of the sofa, her thin fingers playing with and drawing themselves through the tassels of the cushion.

"You see, Jim, as soon as I was free, Louis Sylvester — you remember Louis Sylvester? — wanted to marry me, and even thought that he was the cause of Dick's divorcing me. He actually went East to settle up some property he had left him there, and he 's coming on the steamer."

"Louis Sylvester!" repeated Reddy, staring at her. "Why, he was a bigger fool than I was, and a worse man!" he added bitterly.

"I believe he was," said the lady, smiling, "and I think he still is. But," she added, glancing at Reddy under her light fringed lids, "you — you 're regularly reformed, are n't you? You 're stouter, too, and altogether more solid and commercial looking. Yet who 'd have thought of your keeping a hotel or ever doing anything but speculate in wild-cat or play at draw-poker. How did you drift into it? Come, tell me! I 'm not Mrs. Sylvester just yet, and maybe I might like to go into the business too. You don't want a partner, do you?"

Her manner was light and irresponsible, or rather it suggested a childlike putting of all responsibility for her actions upon others, which he remembered now too well. Perhaps it was this which kept him from observing that the corners of her smiling lips, however, twitched slightly, and that her fingers, twisting the threads of the tassel, were occasionally stiffened nervously. For he burst out: Oh, yes; he had drifted into it when it was a toss up if it was n't his body instead that would be found drifting out to sea from the first wharf of San Francisco. Yes, he had been a common laborer, — a farm hand in those fields she had passed, — a waiter in the farm kitchen, and but for luck he might be taking her orders now in this very hotel. It was not her fault if he was not in the gutter.

She raised her thin hand with a tired gesture as if to ward off the onset of his words.

"The same old Jim," she repeated; "and yet I thought you had forgotten all that now, and become calmer and more sensible since you had taken flesh and grown so matter of fact. You ought to have known then, as you know now, that I never could have been anything to you as long as I was tied to Dick. And you know you forced your presents on me, Jim. I took them from *you* because I would take nothing from Dick, for I hated him. And I never knew positively that you were in straits then; you know you always talked big, Jim, and were always going to make your fortune with the next thing you had in hand!"

It was true, and he remembered it. He had not intended this kind of recrimination, but he was exasperated with her wearied acceptance of his reproaches and by a sudden conviction that his long-cherished grievance against her, now that he had voiced it, was inadequate, mean, and trifling. Yet he could not help saying: —

"Then you had presents from Sylvester, too. I presume you did not hate him, either?"

"He would have married me the day after I got my divorce."

"And so would I," burst out Reddy.

She looked at him fixedly.

"You would?" she said with a peculiar emphasis. "And now" —

He colored. It had been part of his revengeful purpose on seeing her to tell her of his engagement to Nelly. He now found himself tongue-tied, irresolute, and ashamed. Yet he felt she was reading his innermost thoughts.

She, however, only lowered her eyes, and with the same tired expression said: —

"No matter now. Let us talk of something nearer. That was two months ago. And so you have charge of this hotel! I like it so much. I mean the place itself. I fancy I could live here forever. It is so far away and restful. I am so sick of towns and cities, and people. And this little grove is so secluded. If one had merely a little cottage here, one might be so happy."

What did she mean? — what did she expect? — what did she think of doing? She must be got rid of before Nelly's arrival, and yet he found himself wavering under her potent and yet scarcely exerted influence. The desperation of weakness is apt to be more brutal than the determination of strength. He remembered why he had come upstairs, and blurted out: —

"But you can't stay here. The rules are very stringent in regard to — to strangers like yourself. It will be known who you really are and what people say of you. Even your divorce will tell against you. It 's all wrong, I know — but what can I do? I did n't make the rules. I am only a servant of the landlord, and must carry them out."

She leaned back against the sofa and laughed silently. But she presently recovered herself, although with the same expression of fatigue.

"Don't be alarmed, my poor Jim! If you mean your friend, Mr. Woodridge, I know him. It was he, himself, who suggested my coming here. And don't misunderstand him — nor me either. He 's only a good friend of Sylvester's; they had some speculation together. He 's coming here to see me after Louis arrives. He 's waiting in San Francisco for his wife and daughter, who come on the same steamer. So you see you won't get into trouble on my account. Don't look so scared, my dear boy."

"Does he know that you knew me?" said Reddy, with a white face.

"Perhaps. But then that was three months ago," returned the lady, smiling, "and you know how you have reformed since, and grown ever so much more steady and respectable."

"Did he talk to you of me?" continued Reddy, still aghast.

"A little — complimentary of course. Don't look so frightened. I did n't give you away."

Her laugh suddenly ceased, and her face changed into a more nervous activity as she rose and went toward the window. She had heard the sound of wheels outside — the coach had just arrived.

"There 's Mr. Woodridge now," she said in a more animated voice. "The steamer must be in. But I don't see Louis; do you?"

She turned to where Reddy was standing, but he was gone.

The momentary animation of her face changed. She lifted her shoulders with a half gesture of scorn, but in the midst of it suddenly threw herself on the sofa, and buried her face in her hands.

A few moments elapsed with the bustle of arrival in the hall and passages. Then there was a hesitating step at her door. She quickly passed her handkerchief over her wet eyes and resumed her former look of weary acceptation. The door opened. But it was Mr. Woodridge who entered. The rough shirt-sleeved ranchman had developed, during the last four months, into an equally blunt but soberly dressed proprietor. His keen, energetic face, however, wore an expression of embarrassment and anxiety, with an added suggestion of a half humorous appreciation of it.

"I would n't have disturbed you, Mrs. Merrydew," he said, with a gentle bluntness, "if I had n't wanted to ask your advice before I saw Reddy. I 'm keeping out of his way until I could see you. I left Nelly and her mother in 'Frisco. There 's been some queer goings-on on the steamer coming home; Nelly has sprung a new game on her mother, and — and suthin' that looks as if there might be a new deal. However," here a sense that he was, perhaps, treating his statement too seriously, stopped him, and he smiled reassuringly, "that is as may be."

"I don't know," he went on, "as I ever told you anything about my Nelly and Reddy, partik'lerly about Nelly. She 's a good girl, a square girl, but she 's got some all-fired romantic ideas in her head. Mebbee it kem from her reading, mebbee it kem from her not knowing other girls, or seeing too much of a queer sort of men; but she got an interest in the bad ones, and thought it was her mission to reform them, — reform them by pure kindness, attentive little sisterly ways, and moral example. She first tried her hand on Reddy. When he first kem to us he was — well, he was a blazin' ruin! She took him in hand, yanked him outer himself, put his foot on the bed rock, and made him what you see him now. Well — what happened; why, he got reg'larly soft on her; wanted to *marry her*, and I agreed conditionally, of course, to keep him up to the mark. Did you speak?"

"No," said the lady, with her bright eyes fixed upon him.

"Well, that was all well and good, and I 'd liked to have carried out my part of the contract, and was willing, and am still. But you see, Nelly, after she 'd landed Reddy on firm ground, got a little tired, I reckon, gal-like, of the thing she 'd worked so easily, and when she went East she looked around for some other wreck to try her hand on, and she found it on the steamer coming back. And who do you think it was? Why, our friend Louis Sylvester!"

Mrs. Merrydew smiled slightly, with her bright eyes still on the speaker.

"Well, you know he *is* fast at times — if he is a friend of mine — and she reg'larly tackled him; and as my old woman says, it was a sight to see her go for him. But then *he* did n't tumble to it. No! Reformin' ain't in *his* line, I'm afeard. And what was the result? Why, Nelly only got all the more keen when she found she could n't manage him like Reddy, — and, between you and me, she'd have liked Reddy more if he had n't been so easy, — and it's ended, I reckon, in her now falling dead in love with Sylvester. She swears she won't marry any one else, and wants to devote her whole life to him! Now, what's to be done! Reddy don't know it yet, and I don't know how to tell him. Nelly says her mission was ended when she made a new man of him, and he oughter be thankful for that. Could n't you kinder break the news to him and tell him there ain't any show for him?"

"Does he love the girl so much, then?" said the lady gently.

"Yes; but I am afraid there is no hope for Reddy as long as she thinks there's a chance of her capturing Sylvester."

The lady rose and went to the writing-table.

"Would it be any comfort to you, Mr. Woodridge, if you were told that she had not the slightest chance with Sylvester?"

"Yes."

She wrote a few lines on a card, put it in an envelope, and handed it to Woodridge.

"Find out where Sylvester is in San Francisco, and give him that card. I think it will satisfy you. And now as I have to catch the return coach in ten minutes, I must ask you to excuse me while I put my things together."

"And you won't first break the news to Reddy for me?"

"No; and I advise you to keep the whole matter to yourself for the present. Good-by!"

She smiled again, fascinatingly as usual, but, as it seemed to him, a trifle wearily, and then passed into the inner room. Years after, in his practical, matter of-fact recollections of this strange woman, he always remembered her by this smile.

But she had sufficiently impressed him by her parting adjuration to cause him to answer Reddy's eager inquiries with the statement that Nelly and her mother were greatly preoccupied with some friends in San Francisco, and to speedily escape further questioning. Reddy's disappointment was somewhat mitigated by the simultaneous announcement of Mrs. Merrydew's departure. But he was still more relieved and gratified to hear, a few days later, of the marriage of Mrs. Merrydew with Louis Sylvester. If, to the general surprise and comment it excited, he contributed only a smile of cynical toleration and superior self-complacency, the reader will understand and not blame him. Nor did the public, who knew the austere completeness of his reform. Nor did Mr. Woodridge, who failed to understand the only actor in this little comedy who might perhaps have differed from them all.

A month later James Reddy married Nelly Woodridge, in the chilly little church at Oakdale. Perhaps by that time it might have occurred to him that, although the freshness and fruition of summer were everywhere, the building seemed to be still unwarmed. And when he stepped forth with his bride, and glanced across the prosperous landscape toward the distant bay and headlands of San Francisco, he shivered slightly at the dryly practical kiss of the keen northwestern trades.

But he was prosperous and comfortable thereafter, as the respectable owner of broad lands and paying shares. It was said that Mrs. Reddy contributed much to the popularity of the hotel by her charming freedom from prejudice and sympathy with mankind; but this was perhaps only due to the contrast to her more serious and at times abstracted husband. At least this was the charitable opinion of the proverbially tolerant and kind-hearted Baroness Streichholzer (née Merrydew, and relict of the late lamented Louis Sylvester, Esq.), whom I recently had the pleasure of meeting at Wiesbaden, where the waters and reposeful surroundings strongly reminded her of Oakdale.

A CONVERT OF THE MISSION

The largest tent of the Tasajara camp-meeting was crowded to its utmost extent. The excitement of that dense mass was at its highest pitch. The Reverend Stephen Masterton, the single erect, passionate figure of that confused medley of kneeling worshipers, had reached the culminating pitch of his irresistible exhortatory power. Sighs and groans were beginning to respond to his appeals, when the reverend brother was seen to lurch heavily forward and fall to the ground.

At first the effect was that of a part of his performance; the groans redoubled, and twenty or thirty brethren threw themselves prostrate in humble imitation of the preacher. But Sister Deborah Stokes, perhaps through some special revelation of feminine intuition, grasped the fallen man, tore loose his black silk necktie, and dragged him free of the struggling, frantic crowd whose paroxysms he had just evoked. Howbeit he was pale and unconscious, and unable to continue the service. Even the next day, when he had slightly recovered, it was found that any attempt to renew his fervid exhortations produced the same disastrous result. A council was hurriedly held by the elders. In spite of the energetic protests of Sister Stokes, it was held that the Lord "was wrestlin' with his sperrit," and he was subjected to the same extraordinary treatment from the whole congregation that he himself had applied to *them*. Propped up pale and trembling in the "Mourners' Bench" by two brethren, he was "striven with," exhorted, prayed over, and admonished, until insensibility mercifully succeeded convulsions. Spiritual therapeutics having failed, he was turned over to the weak and carnal nursing of "women-folk." But after a month of incapacity he was obliged to yield to "the flesh," and, in the local dialect, "to use a doctor."

It so chanced that the medical practitioner of the district was a man of large experience, of military training, and plain speech. When, therefore, he one day found in his surgery a man of rude Western type, strong-limbed and sun-burned, but trembling, hesitating, and neurotic in movement, after listening to his symptoms gravely, he asked abruptly: "And how much are you drinking now?"

"I am a life-long abstainer," stammered his patient in quivering indignation. But this was followed by another question so frankly appalling to the hearer that he staggered to his feet.

"I'm Stephen Masterton — known of men as a circuit preacher, of the Northern California district," he thundered — "and an enemy of the flesh in all its forms."

"I beg your pardon," responded Doctor Duchesne, grimly, "but as you are suffering from excessive and repeated excitation of the nervous system, and the depression following prolonged artificial exaltation — it makes little difference whether the cause be spiritual, as long as there is a certain physical effect upon your *body* — which I believe you have brought to me to cure. Now — as to diet? you look all wrong there."

"My food is of the simplest — I have no hankering for fleshpots," responded the patient.

"I suppose you call saleratus bread and salt pork and flapjacks *simple?*" said the doctor coolly; "they are *common* enough, and if you were working with your muscles instead of your nerves in that frame of yours they might not hurt you; but you are suffering as much from eating more than you can digest as the veriest gourmand. You must stop all that. Go down to a quiet watering-place for two months" —

"*I* go to a watering-place?" interrupted Masterton; "to the haunt of the idle, the frivolous, and wanton — never!"

"Well, I'm not particular about a 'watering-place,'" said the doctor, with a shrug, "although a little idleness and frivolity with different food would n't hurt you; but you must go somewhere and change your habits and mode of life *completely*. I will find you some sleepy old Spanish town in the southern country where you can rest and diet. If this is distasteful to you," he continued grimly, "you can always call it 'a trial.'"

Stephen Masterton may have thought it so when, a week later, he found himself issuing from a rocky gorge into a rough, badly paved, hilly street, which seemed to be only a continuation of the mountain road itself. It broadened suddenly into a square or plaza, flanked on each side by an irregular row of yellowing adobe houses, with the inevitable verandaed tienda in each corner, and the solitary, galleried fonda, with a half Moorish archway leading into an inner patio or courtyard in the centre.

The whole street stopped as usual at the very door of the mission church, a few hundred yards further on, and under the shadow of the two belfry towers at each angle of the façade, as if this were the Ultima Thule of every traveler. But all that the eye rested on was ruined, worn, and crumbling. The adobe houses were cracked by the incessant sunshine of the half-year-long summer, or the more intermittent earthquake shock; the paved courtyard of the fonda was so uneven and sunken in the centre that the lumbering wagon and faded diligencia stood on an incline, and the mules with difficulty kept their footing while being unladen; the whitened plaster had fallen from the feet of the two pillars that flanked the mission doorway, like bandages from a gouty limb, leaving the reddish core of adobe visible; there were apparently as many broken tiles in the streets and alleys as there were on the heavy red roofs that everywhere asserted themselves — and even seemed to slide down the crumbling walls to the ground. There were hopeless gaps in grille and grating of doorways and windows, where the iron bars had dropped helplessly out, or were bent at different angles. The walls of the peaceful mission garden and the warlike presidio were alike lost in the escalading vines or leveled by the pushing boughs of gnarled pear and olive trees that now surmounted them. The dust lay thick and impalpable in hollow and gutter, and rose in little vapory clouds with a soft detonation at every stroke of his horse's hoofs. Over all this dust and ruin, idleness seemed to reign supreme. From the velvet-jacketed figures lounging motionless in the shadows of the open doorways — so motionless that only the lazy drift of cigarette smoke betokened their breathing — to the reclining peons in the shade of a catalpa, or the squatting Indians in the arroyo — all was sloth and dirt.

The Reverend Stephen Masterton felt his throat swell with his old exhortative indignation. A gaudy yellow fan waved languidly in front of a black rose-crested head at a white-curtained window. He knew he was stifling with righteous wrath, and clapped his spurs to his horse.

Nevertheless, in a few days, by the aid of a letter to the innkeeper, he was installed in a dilapidated adobe house, not unlike those he had seen, but situated in the outskirts, and overlooking the garden and part of the refectory of the old mission. It had even a small garden of its own — if a strip of hot wall, overburdened with yellow and white roses, a dozen straggling callas, a bank of heliotrope, and an almond-tree could be called a garden. It had an open doorway, but so heavily recessed in the thick walls that it preserved seclusion, a sitting-room, and an alcoved bedroom with deep embrasured windows, that, however, excluded the unwinking sunlight and kept an even monotone of shade.

Strange to say, he found it cool, restful, and, in spite of the dust, absolutely clean, and, but for the scent of heliotrope, entirely inodorous. The dry air seemed to dissipate all noxious emanations and decay — the very dust itself in its fine impalpability was volatile with a spice-like piquancy, and left no stain.

A wrinkled Indian woman, brown and veined like a tobacco leaf, ministered to his simple wants. But these wants had also been regulated by Dr. Duchesne. He found himself, with some grave doubts of his effeminacy, breakfasting on a single cup of chocolate instead of his usual bowl of molasses-sweetened coffee; crumbling a crisp tortilla instead of the heavy saleratus bread, greasy flapjack, or the lard-fried steak, and, more wonderful still, completing his repast with purple grapes from the mission wall. He could not deny that it was simple — that it was even refreshing and consistent with the climate and his surroundings. On the other hand, it was the frugal diet of the commonest peasant — and were not those peons slothful idolaters?

At the end of the week — his correspondence being also restricted by his doctor to a few lines to himself regarding his progress — he wrote to that adviser: —

"The trembling and unquiet has almost ceased; I have less nightly turmoil and visions; my carnal appetite seems to be amply mollified and soothed by these viands, whatever may be their ultimate effect upon the weakness of our common sinful nature. But I should not be truthful to you if I did not warn you that I am viewing with the deepest spiritual concern a decided tendency towards sloth, and a folding of the hands over matters that often, I fear, are spiritual as well as temporal. I would ask you to consider, in a spirit of love, if it be not wise to rouse my apathetic flesh, so as to strive, even with the feeblest exhortations —

against this sloth in others — if only to keep one's self from falling into the pit of easy indulgence."

What answer he received is not known, but it is to be presumed that he kept loyal faith with his physician, and gave himself up to simple walks and rides and occasional meditation. His solitude was not broken upon; curiosity was too active a vice, and induced too much exertion for his indolent neighbors, and the Americano's basking seclusion, though unlike the habits of his countrymen, did not affect them. The shopkeeper and innkeeper saluted him always with a profound courtesy which awakened his slight resentment, partly because he was conscious that it was grateful to him, and partly that he felt he ought to have provoked in them a less satisfied condition.

Once, when he had unwittingly passed the confines of his own garden, through a gap in the mission orchard, a lissome, black-coated shadow slipped past him with an obeisance so profound and gentle that he was startled at first into an awkward imitation of it himself, and then into an angry self-examination. He knew that he loathed that long-skirted, woman-like garment, that dangling, ostentatious symbol, that air of secrecy and mystery, and he inflated his chest above his loosely tied cravat and unbuttoned waistcoat with a contrasted sense of freedom. But he was conscious the next day of weakly avoiding a recurrence of this meeting, and in his self-examination put it down to his self-disciplined observance of his doctor's orders. But when he was strong again, and fitted for his Master's work, how strenuously he should improve the occasion this gave him of attacking the Scarlet Woman among her slaves and worshipers!

His afternoon meditations and the perusal of his only book — the Bible — were regularly broken in upon at about sunset by two or three strokes from the cracked bell that hung in the open belfry which reared itself beyond the gnarled pear-trees. He could not say that it was aggressive or persistent, like his own church bells, nor that it even expressed to him any religious sentiment. Moreover, it was not a Sabbath bell, but a *daily* one, and even then seemed to be only a signal to ears easily responsive, rather than a stern reminder. And the hour was always a singularly witching one.

It was when the sun had slipped from the glaring red roofs, and the yellowing adobe of the mission walls and the tall ranks of wild oats on the hillside were all of the one color of old gold. It was when the quivering heat of the arroyo and dusty expanse of plaza was blending with the soft breath of the sea fog that crept through the clefts of the coast range, until a refreshing balm seemed to fall like a benediction on all nature. It was when the trade-wind-swept and irritated surfaces of the rocky gorge beyond were soothed with clinging vapors; when the pines above no longer rocked monotonously, and the great undulating sea of the wild oat plains had gone down and was at rest. It was at this hour, one afternoon, that, with the released scents of the garden, there came to him a strange and subtle perfume that was new to his senses. He laid aside his book, went into the garden, and half-unconscious of his trespass, passed through the mission orchard and thence into the little churchyard beside the church.

Looking at the strange inscriptions in an unfamiliar tongue, he was singularly touched with the few cheap memorials lying upon the graves — like childish toys — and for the moment overlooked the papistic emblems that accompanied them. It struck him vaguely that Death, the common leveler, had made even the symbols of a faith eternal inferior to those simple records of undying memory and affection, and he was for a moment startled into doubt.

He walked to the door of the church: to his surprise it was open. Standing upon the threshold he glanced inside, and stood for a moment utterly bewildered. In a man of refined taste and education that bizarre and highly colored interior would have only provoked a smile or shrug; to Stephen Masterton's highly emotional nature, but artistic inexperience, strangely enough it was profoundly impressive. The heavily timbered, roughly hewn roof, barred with alternate bands of blue and Indian red, the crimson hangings, the gold and black draperies, affected this religious backwoodsman exactly as they were designed to affect the heathen and acolytes for whose conversion the temple had been reared. He could scarcely take his eyes from the tinsel-crowned Mother of Heaven, resplendent in white and gold and glittering with jewels; the radiant shield before the Host, illuminated by tall spectral candles in the mysterious obscurity of the altar, dazzled him like the rayed disk of the setting sun.

A gentle murmur, as of the distant sea, came from the altar. In his naïve bewilderment he had not seen the few kneeling figures in the shadow of column and aisle; it was not until a man, whom he recognized as a muleteer he had seen that afternoon gambling, and drinking in the fonda, slipped by him like a shadow and sank upon his knees in the centre of the aisle that he realized the overpowering truth.

He, Stephen Masterton, was looking upon some rite of Popish idolatry! He was turning quickly away when the keeper of the tienda — a man of sloth and sin — gently approached him from the shadow of a column with a mute gesture, which he took to be one of invitation. A fierce protest of scorn and indignation swelled to his throat, but died upon his lips. Yet he had strength enough to erect his gaunt, emaciated figure, throwing out his long arms and extended palms in the attitude of defiant exorcism, and then rush swiftly from the church. As he did so he thought he saw a faint smile cross the shopkeeper's face, and a whispered exchange of words with a neighboring worshiper of more exalted appearance came to his ears. But it was not intelligible to his comprehension.

The next day he wrote to his doctor in that quaint grandiloquence of written speech with which the half-educated man balances the slips of his colloquial phrasing: —

Do not let the purgation of my flesh be unduly protracted. What with the sloth and idolatries of Baal and Ashteroth, which I see daily around me, I feel that without a protest not only the flesh but the spirit is mortified. But my bodily strength is mercifully returning, and I found myself yesterday able to take a long ride at that hour which they here keep sacred for an idolatrous rite, under the beautiful name of "The Angelus." Thus do they bear false witness to Him! Can you tell me the meaning of the Spanish words "Don Keyhotter"? I am ignorant of these sensuous Southern languages, and am aware that this is not the correct spelling, but I have striven to give the phonetic equivalent. It was used, I am inclined to think, in reference to *myself*, by an idolater.

P. S. — You need not trouble yourself. I have just ascertained that the words in question were simply the title of an idle novel, and of course could not possibly refer to *me*.

Howbeit it was as "Don Quixote" — that is, the common Spaniard's conception of the Knight of La Mancha, merely the simple fanatic and madman — that Mr. Stephen Masterton ever after rode all unconsciously through the streets of the Mission, amid the half-pitying, half-smiling glances of the people.

In spite of his meditations, his single volume, and his habit of retiring early, he found his evenings were growing lonely and tedious. He missed the prayer-meeting, and, above all, the hymns. He had a fine baritone voice, sympathetic, as may be imagined, but not cultivated. One night, in the seclusion of his garden, and secure in his distance from other dwellings, he raised his voice in a familiar camp-meeting hymn with a strong Covenanter's ring in the chorus. Growing bolder as he went on, he at last filled the quiet night with the strenuous sweep of his chant. Surprised at his own fervor, he paused for a moment, listening, half frightened, half ashamed of his outbreak. But there was only the trilling of the night wind in the leaves, or the far-off yelp of a coyote.

For a moment he thought he heard the metallic twang of a stringed instrument in the mission garden beyond his own, and remembered his contiguity to the church with a stir of defiance. But he was relieved, nevertheless. His pent-up emotion had found vent, and without the nervous excitement that had followed his old exaltation. That night he slept better. He had found the Lord again — with psalmody!

The next evening he chanced upon a softer hymn of the same simplicity, but with a vein of human tenderness in its aspirations, which his more hopeful mood gently rendered. At the conclusion of the first verse he was, however, distinctly conscious of being followed by the same twanging sound he had heard on the previous night, and which even his untutored ear could recognize as an attempt to accompany him. But before he had finished the second verse the unknown player, after an ingenious but ineffectual essay to grasp the right chord, abandoned it with an impatient and almost pettish flourish, and a loud bang upon the sounding-board of the unseen instrument. Masterton finished it alone.

With his curiosity excited, however, he tried to discover the locality of the hidden player. The sound evidently came from the mission garden; but in his ignorance of the language he could not even interrogate his Indian housekeeper. On the third night, however, his hymn was uninterrupted by any sound from the former musician. A sense of disappointment, he knew not why, came over him. The kindly overture of the unseen player had been a relief to his loneliness. Yet he had barely concluded the hymn when the familiar sound again struck his ears. But this time the musician played boldly, confidently, and with a singular skill on the instrument.

The brilliant prelude over, to his entire surprise and some confusion, a soprano voice, high, childish, but infinitely quaint and fascinating, was mischievously uplifted. But alas! even to his ears, ignorant of the language, it was very clearly a song of levity and wantonness, of freedom and license, of coquetry and incitement! Yet such was its fascination that he fancied it was reclaimed by the delightful childlike and innocent expression of the singer.

Enough that this tall, gaunt, broad-shouldered man arose, and, overcome by a curiosity almost as childlike, slipped into the garden and glided with an Indian softness of tread towards the voice. The moon shone full upon the ruined mission wall tipped with clusters of dark foliage. Half hiding, half mingling with one of them — an indistinct bulk of light-colored huddled fleeces like an extravagant bird's nest — hung the unknown musician. So intent was the performer's preoccupation that Masterton actually reached the base of the wall immediately below the figure without attracting its attention. But his foot slipped on the crumbling débris with a snapping of dry twigs. There was a quick little cry from above. He had barely time to recover his position before the singer, impulsively leaning over the parapet, had lost hers, and fell outwards. But Masterton was tall, alert, and self-possessed, and threw out his long arms. The next moment they were full of soft flounces, a struggling figure was against his breast, and a woman's frightened little hands around his neck. But he had broken her fall, and almost instantly, yet with infinite gentleness, he released her unharmed, with hardly her crisp flounces crumpled, in an upright position against the wall. Even her guitar, still hanging from her shoulder by a yellow ribbon, had bounded elastic and resounding against the wall, but lay intact at her satin-slippered feet. She caught it up with another quick little cry, but this time more of sauciness than fear, and drew her little hand across its strings, half defiantly.

"I hope you are not hurt?" said the circuit preacher gravely.

She broke into a laugh so silvery that he thought it no extravagance to liken it to the moonbeams that played over her made audible. She was lithe, yet plump; barred with black and yellow and small waisted like a pretty wasp. Her complexion in that light was a sheen of pearl satin that made her eyes blacker and her little mouth redder than any other color could. She was small, but, remembering the fourteen-year-old wife of the shopkeeper, he felt that, for all her childish voice and features, she was a grown woman, and a sudden shyness took hold of him.

But she looked pertly in his face, stood her guitar upright before her, and put her hands behind her back as she leaned saucily against the wall and shrugged her shoulders.

"It was the fault of you," she said, in a broken English that seemed as much infantine as foreign. "What for you not remain to yourself in your own casa? So it come. You creep so — in the dark — and shake my wall, and I fall. And she," pointing to the guitar, "is a'most broke! And for all thees I have only make to you a serenade. Ingrate!"

"I beg your pardon," said Masterton quickly, "but I was curious. I thought I might help you, and" —

"Make yourself another cat on the wall, eh? No; one is enough, thank you!"

A frown lowered on Masterton's brow. "You don't understand me," he said bluntly. "I did not know *who* was here."

'Ah, bueno! Then it is Pepita Ramirez, you see," she said, tapping her bodice with one little finger, "all the same; the niece from Manuel Garcia, who keeps the mission garden and lif there. And you?"

"My name is Masterton."

"How mooch?"

"Masterton," he repeated.

She tried to pronounce it once or twice, desperately, and then shook her little head so violently that a yellow rose fastened over her ear fell to the ground. But she did not heed it, nor the fact that Masterton had picked it up.

"Ah, I cannot!" she said poutingly. "It is as deefeecult to make go as my guitar with your serenade."

"Can you not say 'Stephen Masterton'?" he asked, more gently, with a returning and forgiving sense of her childishness.

"Es-stefen? Ah, *Esteban!* Yes; Don Esteban! Bueno! Then, Don Esteban, what for you sink so melank-olly one night and one night so fierce? The melank-olly, he ees not so bad; but the fierce — ah! he is weeked! Ess it how the Americano make always his serenade?"

Masterton's brow again darkened. And his hymn of exultation had been mistaken by these people — by this — this wanton child!

"It was no serenade," he replied curtly; "it was in praise of the Lord!"

"Of how mooch?"

"Of the Lord of Hosts — of the Almighty in Heaven." He lifted his long arms reverently on high.

"Oh!" she said, with a frightened look, slightly edging away from the wall. At a secure distance she stopped. "Then you are a soldier, Don Esteban?"

"No!"

"Then what for you sink, 'I am a soldier of the Lord,' and you will make die 'in His army'? Oh, yes; you have said." She gathered up her guitar tightly under her arm, shook her small finger at him gravely, and said, "You are a hoombog, Don Esteban; good a' night," — and began to glide away.

"One moment, Miss — Miss Ramirez," called Masterton. "I — that is you — you have — forgotten your rose," he added feebly, holding up the flower. She halted.

"Ah, yes; he have drop, you have pick him up, he is yours. *I* have drop, you have pick *me* up, but I am *not* yours. Good a' night, Comandante Don Esteban!"

With a light laugh she ran along beside the wall for a little distance, suddenly leaped up and disappeared in one of the largest gaps in its ruined and helpless structure. Stephen Masterton gazed after her stupidly, still holding the rose in his hand. Then he threw it away, and reëntered his home.

Lighting his candle, he undressed himself, prayed fervently — so fervently that all remembrance of the idle, foolish incident was wiped from his mind, and went to bed. He slept well and dreamlessly. The next morning, when his thoughts recurred to the previous night, this seemed to him a token that he had not deviated from his spiritual integrity; it did not occur to him that the thought itself was a tacit suspicion.

So his feet quite easily sought the garden again in the early sunshine, even to the wall where she had stood. But he had not taken into account the vivifying freshness of the morning, the renewed promise of life and resurrection in the pulsing air and potent sunlight, and as he stood there he seemed to see the figure of the young girl again leaning against the wall in all the charm of her irrepressible and innocent youth. More than that, he found the whole scene reënacting itself before him: the nebulous drapery half hidden in the foliage, the cry, and the fall; the momentary soft contact of the girl's figure against his own, the clinging arms around his neck, the brush and fragrance of her flounces — all this came back to him with a strength he had *not* felt when it occurred.

He was turning hurriedly away when his eyes fell upon the yellow rose still lying in the débris where he had thrown it — but still pure, fresh, and unfaded. He picked it up again, with a singular fancy that it was the girl herself, and carried it into the house.

As he placed it half shyly in a glass on his table a wonderful thought occurred to him. Was not the episode of last night a special providence? Was not that young girl, wayward and childlike, a mere neophyte in her idolatrous religion, as yet unsteeped in sloth and ignorance, presented to him as a brand to be snatched from the burning? Was not this the opportunity of conversion he had longed for; — this the chance of exercising his gifts of exhortation, that he had been hiding in the napkin of solitude and seclusion? Nay, was not all this *predestined?* His illness, his consequent exile to this land of false gods — this contiguity to the mission — was not all this part of a supremely ordered plan for the girl's salvation — and was *he* not elected and ordained for that service? Nay, more, was not the girl herself a mere unconscious instrument in the hands of a higher power; was not her voluntary attempt to accompany him in his devotional exercise a vague stirring of that predestined force within her? Was not even that wantonness and frivolity contrasted with her childishness — which he had at first misunderstood — the stirrings of the flesh and the spirit, and was he to abandon her in that struggle of good and evil?

He lifted his bowed head, that had been resting on his arm before the little flower on the table — as if it were a shrine — with a flash of resolve in his blue eyes. The wrinkled Concepcion coming to her duties in the morning scarcely recognized her gloomily abstracted master in this transfigured man. He looked ten years younger.

She met his greeting, and the few direct inquiries that his new resolve enabled him to make more freely, with some information — which a later talk with the shopkeeper, who had a fuller English vocabulary, confirmed in detail.

"Yes! truly this was a niece of the mission gardener, who lived with her uncle in the ruined wing of the presidio. She had taken her first communion four years ago. Ah, yes, she was a great musician, and could play on the organ. And the guitar, ah, yes — of a certainty. She was gay, and flirted with the caballeros, young and old, but she cared not for any."

Whatever satisfaction this latter statement gave Masterton, he believed it was because the absence of any disturbing worldly affection would made her an easier convert.

But how continue this chance acquaintance and effect her conversion? For the first time Masterton realized the value of expediency; while his whole nature impelled him to frankly and publicly seek her society and openly exhort her, he knew that this was impossible; still more, he remembered her unmistakable fright at his first expression of faith; he must "be wise as the serpent and harmless as the dove." He must work upon her soul alone, and secretly. He, who would have shrunk from any clandestine association with a girl from mere human affection, saw no wrong in a covert intimacy for the purpose of religious salvation. Ignorant as he was of the ways of the world, and inexperienced in the usages of society, he began to plan methods of secretly meeting her with all the intrigue of a gallant. The perspicacity as well as the intuition of a true lover had descended upon him in this effort of mere spiritual conquest.

Armed with his information and a few Spanish words, he took the yellow Concepcion aside and gravely suborned her to carry a note to be delivered secretly to Miss Ramirez. To his great relief and some surprise the old woman grinned with intelligence, and her withered hand closed with a certain familiar dexterity over the epistle and the accompanying gratuity. To a man less naïvely one-ideaed it might have awakened some suspicion; but to the more sanguine hopefulness of Masterton it only suggested the fancy that Concepcion herself might prove to be open to conversion, and that he should in due season attempt *her* salvation also. But that would be later. For Concepcion was always with him and accessible; the girl was not.

The note, which had cost him some labor of composition, simple and almost business-like as was the result, ran as follows: —

"I wish to see you upon some matter of grave concern to yourself. Will you oblige me by coming again to the wall of the mission to-night at early candlelight? It would avert worldly suspicion if you brought also your guitar."

The afternoon dragged slowly on; Concepcion returned; she had, with great difficulty, managed to see the señorita, but not alone; she had, however, slipped the note into her hand, not daring to wait for an answer.

In his first hopefulness Masterton did not doubt what the answer would be, but as evening approached he grew concerned as to the girl's opportunities of coming, and regretted that he had not given her a choice of time.

Before his evening meal was finished he began to fear for her willingness, and doubt the potency of his note. He was accustomed to exhort *orally* — perhaps he ought to have waited for the chance of *speaking* to her directly without writing.

When the moon rose he was already in the garden. Lingering at first in the shadow of an olive-tree, he waited until the moonbeams fell on the wall and its crests of foliage. But nothing moved among that ebony tracery; his ear was strained for the familiar tinkle of the guitar — all was silent. As the moon rose higher he at last boldly walked to the wall, and listened for any movement on the other side of it. But nothing stirred. She was evidently *not* coming — his note had failed.

He was turning away sadly, but as he faced his home again he heard a light laugh beside him. He stopped. A black shadow stepped out from beneath his own almond-tree. He started, when, with a gesture that seemed familiar to him, the upper part of the shadow seemed to fall away with a long black mantilla and the face of the young girl was revealed.

He could see now that she was clad in black lace from head to foot. She looked taller, older, and he fancied even prettier than before. A sudden doubt of his ability to impress her, a swift realization of all the difficulties of the attempt, and, for the first time, perhaps, a dim perception of the incongruity of the situation came over him.

"I was looking for you on the wall," he stammered.

"Madre de Dios!" she retorted, with a laugh and her old audacity, "you would that I shall *always* hang there, and drop upon you like a pear when you shake the tree? No!"

"You have n't brought your guitar," he continued, still more awkwardly, as he noticed that she held only a long black fan in her hand.

"For why? You would that I *play* it, and when my uncle say, 'Where go Pepita? She is loss,' some one shall say, 'Oh! I have hear her tink-a-tink in the garden of the Americano, who lif alone.' And then — it ess finish!"

Masterton began to feel exceedingly uncomfortable. There was something in this situation that he had not dreamed of. But with the persistency of an awkward man he went on.

"But you played on the wall the other night, and tried to accompany me."

"But that was lass night and on the wall. I had not speak to you, you had not speak to me. You had not sent me the leetle note by your peon." She stopped, and suddenly opening her fan before her face, so that only her mischievous eyes were visible, added: "You had not asked me then to come to hear you make lof to me, Don Esteban. That is the difference."

The circuit preacher felt the blood rush to his face. Anger, shame, mortification, remorse, and fear alternately strove with him, but above all and through all he was conscious of a sharp, exquisite pleasure — that frightened him still more. Yet he managed to exclaim: —

"No! no! You cannot think me capable of such a cowardly trick?"

The girl started, more at the unmistakable sincerity of his utterance than at the words, whose full meaning she may have only imperfectly caught.

"A treek? A treek?" she slowly and wonderingly repeated. Then suddenly, as if comprehending him, she turned her round black eyes full upon him and dropped her fan from her face.

"And *what* for you ask me to come here then?"

"I wanted to talk with you," he began, "on far more serious matters. I wished to" — But he stopped. He could not address this quaint child-woman, staring at him in black-eyed wonder, in either the measured or the impetuous terms with which he would have exhorted a maturer responsible being. He made a step toward her; she drew back, striking at his extended hand half impatiently, half mischievously with her fan.

He flushed — and then burst out bluntly, "I want to talk with you about your soul."

"My what?"

"Your immortal soul, unhappy girl."

"What have you to make with that? Are you a devil?" Her eyes grew rounder, though she faced him boldly.

"I am a minister of the gospel," he said, in hurried entreaty. "You must hear me for a moment. I would save your soul."

"My immortal soul lif with the padre at the mission — you moost seek her there! My mortal *body*," she added, with a mischievous smile, "say to you, 'Good a' night, Don Esteban.'" She dropped him a little curtsy and — ran away.

"One moment, Miss Ramirez," said Masterton eagerly; but she had already slipped beyond his reach. He saw her little black figure passing swiftly beside the moonlit wall, saw it suddenly slide into a shadowy fissure, and vanish.

In his blank disappointment he could not bear to reënter the house he had left so sanguinely a few moments before, but walked moodily in the garden. His discomfiture was the more complete since he felt that his defeat was owing to some mistake in his methods, and not the incorrigibility of his subject.

Was it not a spiritual weakness in him to have resented so sharply the girl's imputation that he wished to make love to her? He should have borne it as Christians had even before now borne slander and false testimony for their faith! He might even have *accepted* it, and let the triumph of her conversion in the end prove his innocence. Or was his purpose incompatible with that sisterly affection he had so often preached to the women of his flock? He might have taken her hand, and called her "Sister Pepita," even as he had called Deborah "Sister." He recalled the fact that he had for an instant held her struggling in his arms: he remembered the thrill that the recollection had caused him, and somehow it now sent a burning blush across his face. He hurried back into the house.

The next day a thousand wild ideas took the place of his former settled resolution. He would seek the padre, this custodian of the young girl's soul; he would convince *him* of his error, or beseech him to give him an equal access to her spirit! He would seek the uncle of the girl, and work upon his feelings.

Then for three or four days he resolved to put the young girl from his mind, trusting after the fashion of his kind for some special revelation from a supreme source as an indication for his conduct. This revelation presently occurred, as it is apt to occur when wanted.

One evening his heart leaped at the familiar sound of Pepita's guitar in the distance. Whatever his ultimate intention now, he hurriedly ran into the garden. The sound came from the former direction, but as he unhesitatingly approached the mission wall, he could see that she was not upon it, and as the notes of her guitar were struck again, he knew that they came from the other side. But the chords were a prelude to one of his own hymns, and he stood entranced as her sweet, child-like voice rose with the very words that he had sung. The few defects were those of purely oral imitation, the accents, even the slight reiteration of the "s," were Pepita's own: —

"Cheeldren oof the Heavenly King,
As ye journey essweetly ssing;
Essing your great Redeemer's praise,
Glorioos in Hees works and ways."

He was astounded. Her recollection of the air and words was the more wonderful, for he remembered now that he had only sung that particular hymn once. But to his still greater delight and surprise, her voice rose again in the second verse, with a touch of plaintiveness that swelled his throat: —

"We are traveling home to God,
In the way our farzers trod,
They are happy now, and we
Soon their happiness shall see."

The simple, almost childish words — so childish that they might have been the fitting creation of her own childish lips — here died away with a sweep and crash of the whole strings. Breathless silence followed, in which Stephen Masterton could feel the beatings of his own heart.

"Miss Ramirez," he called, in a voice that scarcely seemed his own. There was no reply. "Pepita!" he repeated; it was strangely like the accent of a lover, but he no longer cared. Still the singer's voice was silent.

Then he ran swiftly beside the wall, as he had seen her run, until he came to the fissure. It was overgrown with vines and brambles almost as impenetrable as an abatis, but if she had pierced it in her delicate crape dress, so could he! He brushed roughly through, and found himself in a glimmering aisle of pear-trees close by the white wall of the mission church.

For a moment in that intricate tracing of ebony and ivory made by the rising moon, he was dazzled, but evidently his irruption into the orchard had not been as lithe and silent as her own, for a figure in a parti-colored dress suddenly started into activity, and running from the wall, began to course through the trees until it became apparently a part of that involved pattern. Nothing daunted, however, Stephen Masterton pursued; his speed increased as he recognized the flounces of Pepita's barred dress, but the young girl had the advantage of knowing the locality, and could evade her pursuer by unsuspected turns and doubles.

For some moments this fanciful sylvan chase was kept up in perfect silence; it might have been a woodland nymph pursued by a wandering shepherd. Masterton presently saw that she was making towards a tiled roof that was now visible as projecting over the presidio wall, and was evidently her goal of refuge. He redoubled his speed; with skillful audacity and sheer strength of his broad shoulders he broke through a dense ceanothus hedge which

Pepita was swiftly skirting, and suddenly appeared between her and her house.

With her first cry, the young girl turned and tried to bury herself in the hedge; but in another stride the circuit preacher was at her side, and caught her panting figure in his arms.

While he had been running he had swiftly formulated what he should do and what he should say to her. To his simple appeal for her companionship and willing ear he would add a brotherly tenderness, that should invite her trustfulness in him; he would confess his wrong and ask her forgiveness of his abrupt solicitations; he would propose to teach her more hymns, they would practice psalmody together; even this priest, the custodian of her soul, could not object to that; but chiefly he would thank her: he would tell her how she had pleased him, and this would lead to more serious and thoughtful converse. All this was in his mind while he ran, was upon his lips as he caught her, and for an instant she lapsed, exhausted, in his arms. But, alas! even in that moment he suddenly drew her towards him, and kissed her as only a lover could!

. . . .

The wire grass was already yellowing on the Tasajara plains with the dusty decay of the long, dry summer, when Dr. Duchesne returned to Tasajara. He came to see the wife of Deacon Sanderson, who, having for the twelfth time added to the population of the settlement, was not "doing as well" as everybody — except, possibly, Dr. Duchesne — expected. After he had made this hollow-eyed, over-burdened, under-nourished woman as comfortable as he could in her rude, neglected surroundings, to change the dreary chronicle of suffering, he turned to the husband, and said: "And what has become of Mr. Masterton, who used to be in your — vocation?"

A long groan came from the deacon.

"Hallo! I hope he has not had a relapse," said the doctor earnestly. "I thought I'd knocked all that nonsense out of him — I beg your pardon — I mean," he added hurriedly, "he wrote to me only a few weeks ago that he was picking up his strength again and doing well!"

"In his weak, gross, sinful flesh — yes, no doubt," returned the deacon scornfully, "and, perhaps, even in a worldly sense, for those who value the vanities of life; but he is lost to us, for all time, and lost to eternal life forever. Not," he continued in sanctimonious vindictiveness, "but that I often had my doubts of Brother Masterton's steadfastness. He was too much given to imagery and song."

"But what has he done?" persisted Dr. Duchesne.

"Done! He has embraced the Scarlet Woman!"

"Dear me!" said the doctor, "so soon? Is it anybody you knew here? — not anybody's wife? Eh?"

"He has entered the Church of Rome," said the deacon indignantly; "he has forsaken the God of his fathers for the tents of the idolaters; he is the consort of Papists and the slave of the Pope!"

"But are you *sure?*" said Dr. Duchesne, with perhaps less concern than before.

"Sure?" returned the deacon angrily. "Did n't Brother Bulkley, on account of warning reports made by a God-fearing and soul-seeking teamster, make a special pilgrimage to this land of Sodom to inquire and spy out its wickedness? Did n't he find Stephen Masterton steeped in the iniquity of practicing on an organ — he that scorned even a violin or harmonium in the tents of the Lord — in an idolatrous chapel, with a foreign female Papist for a teacher? Did n't he find him a guest at the board of a Jesuit priest, visiting the schools of the mission, where this young Jezebel of a singer teaches the children to chant in unknown tongues? Did n't he find him living with a wrinkled Indian witch who called him 'Padrone,' — and speaking her gibberish? Did n't they find him, who left here a man mortified in flesh and spirit and pale with striving with sinners, fat and rosy from native wines and fleshpots, and even vain and gaudy in colored apparel? And last of all, did n't Brother Bulkley hear that a rumor was spread far and wide that this miserable backslider was to take to himself a wife — in one of these strange women — that very Jezebel who seduced him? What do you call that?"

"It looks a good deal like human nature," said the doctor musingly, "but *I* call it a cure!"

CHU CHU

I do not believe that the most enthusiastic lover of that "useful and noble animal," the horse, will claim for him the charm of geniality, humor, or expansive confidence. Any creature who will not look you squarely in the eye — whose only oblique glances are inspired by fear, distrust, or a view to attack; who has no way of returning caresses, and whose favorite expression is one of head-lifting disdain, may be "noble" or "useful," but can be hardly said to add to the gayety of nations. Indeed it may be broadly stated that, with the single exception of gold-fish, of all animals kept for the recreation of mankind the horse is alone capable of exciting a passion that shall be absolutely hopeless. I deem these general remarks necessary to prove that my unreciprocated affection for Chu Chu was not purely individual or singular. And I may add that to these general characteristics she brought the waywardness of her capricious sex.

She came to me out of the rolling dust of an emigrant wagon, behind whose tail-board she was gravely trotting. She was a half-broken colt — in which character she had at different times unseated everybody in the train — and, although covered with dust, she had a beautiful coat, and the most lambent gazelle-like eyes I had ever seen. I think she kept these latter organs purely for ornament — apparently looking at things with her nose, her sensitive ears, and, sometimes, even a slight lifting of her slim near fore leg. On our first interview I thought she favored me with a coy glance, but as it was accompanied by an irrelevant "Look out!" from her owner, the teamster, I was not certain. I only know that after some conversation, a good deal of mental reservation, and the disbursement of considerable coin, I found myself standing in the dust of the departing emigrant wagon with one end of a forty-foot riata in my hand, and Chu Chu at the other.

I pulled invitingly at my own end, and even advanced a step or two toward her. She then broke into a long disdainful pace, and began to circle round me at the extreme limit of her tether. I stood admiring her free action for some moments — not always turning with her, which was tiring — until I found that she was gradually winding herself up *on me!* Her frantic astonishment when she suddenly found herself thus brought up against me was one of the most remarkable things I ever saw, and nearly took me off my legs. Then, when she had pulled against the riata until her narrow head and prettily arched neck were on a perfectly straight line with it, she as suddenly slackened the tension and condescended to follow me, at an angle of her own choosing. Sometimes it was on one side of me, sometimes on the other. Even then the sense of my dreadful contiguity apparently would come upon her like a fresh discovery, and she would become hysterical. But I do not think that she really *saw* me. She looked at the riata and sniffed it disparagingly; she pawed some pebbles that were near me tentatively with her small hoof; she started back with a Robinson Crusoe-like horror of my footprints in the wet gully, but my actual personal presence she ignored. She would sometimes pause, with her head thoughtfully between her fore legs, and apparently say: "There is some extraordinary presence here: animal, vegetable, or mineral — I can't make out which — but it 's not good to eat, and I loathe and detest it."

When I reached my house in the suburbs, before entering the "fifty vara" lot inclosure, I deemed it prudent to leave her outside while I informed the household of my purchase; and with this object I tethered her by the long riata to a solitary sycamore which stood in the centre of the road, the crossing of two frequented thoroughfares. It was not long, however, before I was interrupted by shouts and screams from that vicinity, and on returning thither I found that Chu Chu, with the assistance of her riata, had securely wound up two of my neighbors to the tree, where they presented the appearance of early Christian martyrs. When I released them it appeared that they had been attracted by Chu Chu's graces, and had offered her overtures of affection, to which she had characteristically rotated with this miserable result. I led her, with some difficulty, warily keeping clear of the riata, to the inclosure, from whose fence I had previously removed several bars. Although the space was wide enough to have admitted a troop of cavalry she affected not to notice it, and managed to kick away part of another section on entering. She resisted the stable for some time, but after carefully examining it with her hoofs, and an affectedly meek outstretching of her nose, she consented to recognize some oats in the feed-box — without looking at them — and was formally installed. All this while she had resolutely ignored my presence. As I stood watching her she suddenly stopped eating; the same reflective look came over her. "Surely I am not mistaken, but that same obnoxious creature is somewhere about here!" she seemed to say, and shivered at the possibility.

It was probably this which made me confide my unreciprocated affection to one of my neighbors — a man supposed to be an authority on horses, and particularly of that wild species to which Chu Chu belonged. It was he who, leaning over the edge of the stall where she was complacently and, as usual, obliviously munching, absolutely dared to toy with a pet lock of hair which she wore over the pretty star on her forehead.

"Ye see, captain," he said, with jaunty easiness, "hosses is like wimmen; ye don't want ter use any standoffishness or shyness with *them;* a stiddy but keerless sort o' familiarity, a kind o' free but firm handlin', jess like this, to let her see who's master" —

We never clearly knew *how* it happened; but when I picked up my neighbor from the doorway, amid the broken splinters of the stall rail, and a quantity of oats that mysteriously filled his hair and pockets, Chu Chu was found to have faced around the other way, and was contemplating her fore legs, with her hind ones in the other stall. My neighbor spoke of damages while he was in the stall, and of physical coercion when he was out of it again. But here Chu Chu, in some marvelous way, righted herself, and my neighbor departed hurriedly with a brimless hat and an unfinished sentence.

My next intermediary was Enriquez Saltello — a youth of my own age, and the brother of Consuelo Saltello, whom I adored. As a Spanish Californian he was presumed, on account of Chu Chu's half-Spanish origin, to have superior knowledge of her character, and I even vaguely believed that his language and accent would fall familiarly on her ear. There was the drawback, however, that he always preferred to talk in a marvelous English, combining Castilian precision with what he fondly believed to be Californian slang.

"To confer then as to thees horse, which is not — observe me — a Mexican plug! Ah, no! you can your boots bet on that. She is of Castilian stock — believe me and strike me dead! I will myself at different times overlook and affront her in the stable, examine her as to the assault, and why she should do thees thing. When she is of the exercise I will also accost and restrain her. Remain tranquil, my friend! When a few days shall pass much shall be changed, and she will be as another. Trust your oncle to do thees thing! Comprehend me? Everything shall be lovely, and the goose hang high!"

Conformably with this he "overlooked" her the next day, with a cigarette between his yellow-stained fingertips, which made her sneeze in a silent pantomimic way, and certain Spanish blandishments of speech which she received with more complacency. But I don't think she ever even looked at him. In vain he protested that she was the "dearest" and "littlest" of his "little loves" — in vain he asserted that she was his patron saint, and that it was his soul's delight to pray to her; she accepted the compliment with her eyes fixed upon the manger. When he had exhausted his whole stock of endearing diminutives, adding a few playful and more audacious sallies, she remained with her head down, as if inclined to meditate upon them. This he declared was at least an improvement on her former performances. It may have been my own jealousy, but I fancied she was only saying to herself, "Gracious! can there be *two* of them?"

"Courage and patience, my friend," he said, as we were slowly quitting the stable. "Thees horse is yonge, and has not yet the habitude of the person. To-morrow, at another season, I shall give to her a foundling" ("fondling," I have reason to believe, was the word intended by Enriquez) — "and we shall see. It shall be as easy as to fall away from a log. A leetle more of this chin music which your friend Enriquez possesses, and some tapping of the head and neck, and you are there. You are ever the right side up. Houp la! But let us not precipitate this thing. The more haste, we do not so much accelerate ourselves."

He appeared to be suiting the action to the word as he lingered in the doorway of the stable. "Come on," I said.

"Pardon," he returned, with a bow that was both elaborate and evasive, "but you shall yourself precede me — the stable is *yours*."

"Oh, come along!" I continued impatiently. To my surprise he seemed to dodge back into the stable again. After an instant he reappeared.

"Pardon! but I am re-strain! Of a truth, in this instant I am grasp by the mouth of thees horse in the coat-tail of my dress! She will that I should remain. It would seem" — he disappeared again — "that" — he was out once more — "the experiment is a sooccess! She reciprocate! She is, of a truth, gone on me. It is lofe!" — a stronger pull from Chu Chu here sent him in again — "but" — he was out now triumphantly with half his garment torn away — "I shall coquet."

Nothing daunted, however, the gallant fellow was back next day with a Mexican saddle, and attired in the complete outfit of a vaquero. Overcome though *he* was by heavy deerskin trousers, open at the side from the knees down, and fringed with bullion buttons, an enormous flat sombrero, and a stiff, short embroidered velvet jacket, I was more concerned at the ponderous saddle and equipments intended for the slim Chu Chu. That these would hide and conceal her beautiful curves and contour, as well as overweight her, seemed certain; that she would resist them all to the last seemed equally clear. Nevertheless, to my surprise, when she was led out, and the saddle thrown deftly across her back, she was passive. Was it possible that some drop of her old Spanish blood responded to its clinging embrace? She did not either look at it or smell it. But when Enriquez began to tighten the cinch or girth a more singular thing occurred. Chu Chu visibly distended her slender barrel to twice its dimensions; the more he pulled the more she swelled, until I was actually ashamed of her. Not so Enriquez. He smiled at us, and complacently stroked his thin mustache.

"Eet is ever so! She is the child of her grandmother! Even when you shall make saddle thees old Castilian stock, it will make large — it will become a balloon! Eet is a trick — eet is a leetle game — believe me. For why?"

I had not listened, as I was at that moment astonished to see the saddle slowly slide under Chu Chu's belly, and her figure resume, as if by magic, its former slim proportions. Enriquez followed my eyes, lifted his shoulders, shrugged them, and said smilingly, "Ah, you see!"

When the girths were drawn in again with an extra pull or two from the indefatigable Enriquez, I fancied that Chu Chu nevertheless secretly enjoyed it, as her sex is said to appreciate tight lacing. She drew a deep sigh, possibly of satisfaction, turned her neck, and apparently tried to glance at her own figure — Enriquez promptly withdrawing to enable her to do so easily. Then the dread moment arrived. Enriquez, with his hand on her mane, suddenly paused and, with exaggerated courtesy, lifted his hat and made an inviting gesture.

"You will honor me to precede."

I shook my head laughingly.

"I see," responded Enriquez gravely. "You have to attend the obsequies of your aunt who is dead, at two of the clock. You have to meet your broker who has bought you feefty share of the Comstock lode — at thees moment — or you are loss! You are excuse! Attend! Gentlemen, make your bets! The band has arrived to play! 'Ere we are!"

With a quick movement the alert young fellow had vaulted into the saddle. But, to the astonishment of both of us, the mare remained perfectly still. There was Enriquez bolt upright in the stirrups, completely overshadowing by his saddle-flaps, leggings, and gigantic spurs the fine proportions of Chu Chu, until she might have been a placid Rosinante, bestridden by some youthful Quixote. She closed her eyes, she was going to sleep! We were dreadfully disappointed. This clearly would not do. Enriquez lifted the reins cautiously! Chu Chu moved forward slowly — then stopped, apparently lost in reflection.

"Affront her on thees side."

I approached her gently. She shot suddenly into the air, coming down again on perfectly stiff legs with a springless jolt. This she instantly followed by a succession of other rocket-like propulsions, utterly unlike a leap, all over the inclosure. The movements of the unfortunate Enriquez were equally unlike any equitation I ever saw. He appeared occasionally over Chu Chu's head, astride of her neck and tail, or in the free air, but never *in* the saddle. His rigid legs, however, never lost the stirrups, but came down regularly, accentuating her springless hops. More than that, the disproportionate excess of rider, saddle, and accoutrements was so great that he had, at times, the appearance of lifting Chu Chu forcibly from the ground by superior strength, and of actually contributing to her exercise! As they came toward me, a wild tossing and flying mass of hoofs and spurs, it was not only difficult to distinguish them apart, but to ascertain how much of the jumping was done by Enriquez separately. At last Chu Chu brought matters to a close by making for the low-stretching branches of an oak-tree which stood at the corner of the lot. In a few moments she emerged from it — but without Enriquez.

I found the gallant fellow disengaging himself from the fork of a branch in which he had been firmly wedged, but still smiling and confident, and his cigarette between his teeth. Then for the first time he removed it, and seating himself easily on the branch with his legs dangling down, he blandly waved aside my anxious queries with a gentle reassuring gesture.

"Remain tranquil, my friend. Thees does not count!

I have conquer — you observe — for why? I have *never* for once *arrive at the ground!* Consequent she is disappoint! She will ever that I *should!* But I have got her when the hair is not long! Your oncle Henry" — with an angelic wink — "is fly! He is ever a bully boy, with the eye of glass! Believe me. Behold! I am here! Big Injun! Whoop!"

He leaped lightly to the ground. Chu Chu, standing watchfully at a little distance, was evidently astonished at his appearance. She threw out her hind hoofs violently, shot up into the air until the stirrups crossed each other high above the saddle, and made for the stable in a succession of rabbit-like bounds — taking the precaution to remove the saddle, on entering, by striking it against the lintel of the door.

"You observe," said Enriquez blandly, "she would make that thing of *me*. Not having the good occasion, she ees dissatisfied. Where are you now?"

Two or three days afterwards he rode her again with the same result — accepted by him with the same heroic complacency. As we did not, for certain reasons, care to use the open road for this exercise, and as it was impossible to remove the tree, we were obliged to submit to the inevitable. On the following day I mounted her — undergoing the same experience as Enriquez, with the individual sensation of falling from a third-story window on top of a counting-house stool, and the variation of being projected over the fence. When I found that Chu Chu had not accompanied me, I saw Enriquez at my side.

"More than ever it is become necessary that we should do thees things again," he said gravely, as he assisted me to my feet. "Courage, my noble General! God and Liberty! Once more on to the breach! Charge, Chestare, charge! Come on, Don Stanley! 'Ere we are!"

He helped me none too quickly to catch my seat again, for it apparently had the effect of the turned peg on the enchanted horse in the Arabian Nights, and Chu Chu instantly rose into the air. But she came down this time before the open window of the kitchen, and I alighted easily on the dresser. The indefatigable Enriquez followed me.

"Won't this do?" I asked meekly.

"It ees *better* — for you arrive *not* on the ground," he said cheerfully; "but you should not once but a thousand times make trial! Ha! Go and win! Nevare die and say so! 'Eave ahead! 'Eave! There you are!"

Luckily, this time I managed to lock the rowels of my long spurs under her girth, and she could not unseat me. She seemed to recognize the fact after one or two plunges, when, to my great surprise, she suddenly sank to the ground and quietly rolled over me. The action disengaged my spurs, but, righting herself without getting up, she turned her beautiful head and absolutely *looked* at me! — still in the saddle. I felt myself blushing! But the voice of Enriquez was at my side.

"Errise, my friend; you have conquer! It is *she* who has arrive at the ground! *You* are all right. It is done; believe me, it is feenish! No more shall she make thees thing. From thees instant you shall ride her as the cow — as the rail of thees fence — and remain tranquil. For she is a-broke! Ta-ta! Regain your hats, gentlemen! Pass in your checks! It is ovar! How are you now?" He lit a fresh cigarette, put his hands in his pockets, and smiled at me blandly.

For all that, I ventured to point out that the habit of alighting in the fork of a tree, or the disengaging of one's self from the saddle on the ground, was attended with inconvenience, and even ostentatious display. But Enriquez swept the objections away with a single gesture. "It is the *preencipal* — the bottom fact — at which you arrive. The next come of himself! Many horse have achieve to mount the rider by the knees, and relinquish after thees same fashion. My grandfather had a barb of thees kind — but she has gone dead, and so have my grandfather. Which is sad and strange! Otherwise I shall make of them both an instant example!"

I ought to have said that although these performances were never actually witnessed by Enriquez's sister — for reasons which he and I thought sufficient — the dear girl displayed the greatest interest in them, and, perhaps aided by our mutually complimentary accounts of each other, looked upon us both as invincible heroes. It is possible also that she overestimated our success, for she suddenly demanded that I should *ride* Chu Chu to her house, that she might see her. It was not far; by going through a back lane I could avoid the trees which exercised such a fatal fascination for Chu Chu. There was a pleading, childlike entreaty in Consuelo's voice that I could not resist, with a slight flash from her lustrous dark eyes that I did not care to encourage. So I resolved to try it at all hazards.

My equipment for the performance was modeled after Enriquez's previous costume, with the addition of a few fripperies of silver and stamped leather out of compliment to Consuelo, and even with a faint hope that it might appease Chu Chu. *She* certainly looked beautiful in her glittering accoutrements, set off by her jet-black shining coat. With an air of demure abstraction she permitted me to mount her, and even for a hundred yards or so indulged in a mincing maidenly amble that was not without a touch of coquetry. Encouraged by this, I addressed a few terms of endearment to her, and in the exuberance of my youthful enthusiasm I even confided to her my love for Consuelo, and begged her to be "good" and not disgrace herself and me before my Dulcinea. In my foolish trustfulness I was rash enough to add a caress, and to pat her soft neck. She stopped instantly with an hysteric shudder. I knew what was passing through her mind: she had suddenly become aware of my baleful existence.

The saddle and bridle Chu Chu was becoming accustomed to, but who was this living, breathing object that had actually touched her? Presently her oblique vision was attracted by the fluttering movement of a fallen oak-leaf in the road before her. She had probably seen many oak-leaves many times before; her ancestors had no doubt been familiar with them on the trackless hills and in field and paddock, but this did not alter her profound conviction that I and the leaf were identical, that our baleful touch was something indissolubly connected. She reared before that innocent leaf, she revolved round it, and then fled from it at the top of her speed.

The lane passed before the rear wall of Saltello's garden. Unfortunately, at the angle of the fence stood a beautiful madroño-tree, brilliant with its scarlet berries, and endeared to me as Consuelo's favorite haunt, under whose protecting shade I had more than once avowed my youthful passion. By the irony of fate Chu Chu caught sight of it, and with a succession of spirited bounds instantly made for it. In another moment I was beneath it, and Chu Chu shot like a rocket into the air. I had barely time to withdraw my feet from the stirrups, to throw up one arm to protect my glazed sombrero and grasp an overhanging branch with the other, before Chu Chu darted off. But to my consternation, as I gained a secure perch on the tree, and looked about me, I saw her — instead of running away — quietly trot through the open gate into Saltello's garden.

Need I say that it was to the beneficent Enriquez that I again owed my salvation? Scarcely a moment elapsed before his bland voice rose in a concentrated whisper from the corner of the garden below me. He had divined the dreadful truth!

"For the love of God, collect to yourself many kinds of thees berry! All you can! Your full arms round! Rest tranquil. Leave to your ole oncle to make for you a delicate exposure. At the instant!"

He was gone again. I gathered, wonderingly, a few of the larger clusters of parti-colored fruit, and patiently waited. Presently he reappeared, and with him the lovely Consuelo — her dear eyes filled with an adorable anxiety.

"Yes," continued Enriquez to his sister, with a confidential lowering of tone but great distinctness of utterance, "it is ever so with the American! He will ever make *first* the salutation of the flower or the fruit, picked to himself by his own hand, to the lady where he call. It is the custom of the American hidalgo! My God — what will you? *I* make it not — it is so! Without doubt he is in this instant doing thees thing. That is why he have let go his horse to precede him here; it is always the etiquette to offer these things on the feet. Ah! behold! it is he! — Don Francisco! Even now he will descend from thees tree! Ah! You make the blush, little sister (archly)! I will retire! I am discreet; two is not company for the one! I make tracks! I am gone!"

How far Consuelo entirely believed and trusted her ingenious brother I do not know, nor even then cared to inquire. For there was a pretty mantling of her olive cheek, as I came forward with my offering, and a certain significant shyness in her manner that were enough to throw me into a state of hopeless imbecility. And I was always miserably conscious that Consuelo possessed an exalted sentimentality, and a predilection for the highest mediæval romance, in which I knew I was lamentably deficient. Even in our most confidential moments I was always aware that I weakly lagged behind this daughter of a gloomily distinguished ancestry, in her frequent incursions into a vague but poetic past. There was something of the dignity of the Spanish châtelaine in the sweetly grave little figure that advanced to accept my specious offering. I think I should have fallen on my knees to present it, but for the presence of the all-seeing Enriquez. But why did I even at that moment remember that he had early bestowed upon her the nickname of "Pomposa"? This, as Enriquez himself might have observed, was "sad and strange."

I managed to stammer out something about the madroño berries being at her "disposicion" (the tree was in her own garden!), and she took the branches in her little brown hand with a soft response to my unutterable glances.

But here Chu Chu, momentarily forgotten, executed a happy diversion. To our astonishment she gravely walked up to Consuelo and, stretching out her long slim neck, not only sniffed curiously at the berries, but even protruded a black under lip towards the young girl herself. In another instant Consuelo's dignity melted. Throwing her arms around Chu Chu's neck she embraced and kissed her. Young as I was, I understood the divine significance of a girl's vicarious effusiveness at such a moment, and felt delighted. But I was the more astonished that the usually sensitive horse not only submitted to these caresses, but actually responded to the extent of affecting to nip my mistress's little right ear.

This was enough for the impulsive Consuelo. She ran hastily into the house, and in a few moments reappeared in a bewitching riding-skirt gathered round her jimp waist. In vain Enriquez and myself joined in earnest entreaty: the horse was hardly broken for even a man's riding yet; the saints alone could tell what the nervous creature might do with a woman's skirt flapping at her side! We begged for delay, for reflection, for at least time to change the saddle — but with no avail! Consuelo was determined, indignant, distressingly reproachful! Ah, well! if Don Pancho (an ingenious diminutive of my Christian name) valued his horse so highly — if he were jealous of the evident devotion of the animal to herself, he would — But here I succumbed! And then I had the felicity of holding that little foot for one brief moment in the hollow of my hand, of readjusting the skirt as she threw her knee over the saddle-horn, of clasping her tightly — only half in fear — as I surrendered the reins to her grasp. And to tell the truth, as Enriquez and I fell back, although I had insisted upon still keeping hold of the end of the riata, it was a picture to admire. The petite figure of the young girl, and the graceful folds of her skirt, admirably harmonized with Chu Chu's lithe contour, and as the mare arched her slim neck and raised her slender head under the pressure of the reins, it was so like the lifted velvet-capped toreador crest of Consuelo herself, that they seemed of one race.

I would not that you should hold the riata," said Consuelo petulantly.

"I hesitated — Chu Chu looked certainly very amiable — I let go. She began to amble towards the gate, not mincingly as before, but with a freer and fuller stride. In spite of the incongruous saddle the young girl's seat was admirable. As they neared the gate she cast a single mischievous glance at me, jerked at the rein, and Chu Chu sprang into the road at a rapid canter. I watched them fearfully and breathlessly, until at the end of the lane I saw Consuelo rein in slightly, wheel easily, and come flying back. There was no doubt about it; the horse was under perfect control. Her second subjugation was complete and final!

Overjoyed and bewildered, I overwhelmed them with congratulations; Enriquez alone retaining the usual brotherly attitude of criticism, and a superior toleration of a lover's enthusiasm. I ventured to hint to Consuelo (in what I believed was a safe whisper) that Chu Chu only showed my own feelings towards her.

"Without doubt," responded Enriquez gravely. "She have of herself assist you to climb to the tree to pull to yourself the berry for my sister."

But I felt Consuelo's little hand return my pressure, and I forgave and even pitied him.

From that day forward, Chu Chu and Consuelo were not only firm friends but daily companions. In my devotion I would have presented the horse to the young girl, but with flattering delicacy she preferred to call it mine.

"I shall erride it for you, Pancho," she said. "I shall feel," she continued, with exalted although somewhat vague poetry, "that it is of *you!* You lofe the beast — it is therefore of a necessity *you*, my Pancho! It is *your* soul I shall erride like the wings of the wind — your lofe in this beast shall be my only cavalier forever."

I would have preferred something whose vicarious qualities were less uncertain than I still felt Chu Chu's to be, but I kissed the girl's hand submissively. It was only when I attempted to accompany her in the flesh, on another horse, that I felt the full truth of my instinctive fears. Chu Chu would not permit any one to approach her mistress's side. My mounted presence revived in her all her old blind astonishment and disbelief in my existence; she would start suddenly, face about, and back away from me in utter amazement as if I had been only recently created, or with an affected modesty as if I had been just guilty of some grave indecorum towards her sex which she really could not stand. The frequency of these exhibitions in the public highway were not only distressing to me as a simple escort, but as it had the effect on the casual spectators of making Consuelo seem to participate in Chu Chu's objections, I felt that, as a lover, it could not be borne. Any attempt to coerce Chu Chu ended in her running away. And my frantic pursuit of her was open to equal misconstruction.

"Go it, miss, the little dude is gainin' on you!" shouted by a drunken teamster to the frightened Consuelo, once checked me in mid-career.

Even the dear girl herself saw the uselessness of my real presence, and after a while was content to ride with "my soul."

Notwithstanding this, I am not ashamed to say that it was my custom, whenever she rode out, to keep a slinking and distant surveillance of Chu Chu on another horse, until she had fairly settled down to her pace. A little nod of Consuelo's round black-and-red toreador hat, or a kiss tossed from her riding-whip, was reward enough!

I remember a pleasant afternoon when I was thus awaiting her in the outskirts of the village. The eternal smile of the Californian summer had begun to waver and grow less fixed; dust lay thick on leaf and blade; the dry hills were clothed in russet leather; the trade-winds were shifting to the south with an ominous warm humidity; a few days longer and the rains would be here. It so chanced that this afternoon my seclusion on the roadside was accidentally invaded by a village belle — a Western young lady somewhat older than myself, and of flirtatious reputation. As she persistently and — as I now have reason to believe — mischievously lingered, I had only a passing glimpse of Consuelo riding past at an unaccustomed speed which surprised me at the moment. But as I reasoned later that she was only trying to avoid a merely formal meeting, I thought no more about it. It was not until I called at the house to fetch Chu Chu at the usual hour, and found that Consuelo had not yet returned, that a recollection of Chu Chu's furious pace again troubled me. An hour passed — it was getting towards sunset, but there were no signs of Chu Chu or her mistress. I became seriously alarmed. I did not care to reveal my fears to the family, for I felt myself responsible for Chu Chu. At last I desperately saddled my horse, and galloped off in the direction she had taken. It was the road to Rosario and the hacienda of one of her relations, where she sometimes halted.

The road was a very unfrequented one, twisting like a mountain river; indeed, it was the bed of an old watercourse, between brown hills of wild oats, and debouching at last into a broad blue lake-like expanse of alfalfa meadows. In vain I strained my eyes over the monotonous level; nothing appeared to rise above or move across it. In the faint hope that she might have lingered at the hacienda, I was spurring on again when I heard a slight splashing on my left. I looked around. A broad patch of fresher-colored herbage and a cluster of dwarfed alders indicated a hidden spring. I cautiously approached its quaggy edges, when I was shocked by what appeared to be a sudden vision! Mid-leg deep in the centre of a greenish pool stood Chu Chu! But without a strap or buckle of harness upon her — as naked as when she was foaled!

For a moment I could only stare at her in bewildered terror. Far from recognizing me, she seemed to be absorbed in a nymph-like contemplation of her own graces in the pool. Then I called "Consuelo!" and galloped frantically around the spring. But there was no response, nor was there anything to be seen but the all-unconscious Chu Chu. The pool, thank Heaven! was not deep enough to have drowned any one; there were no signs of a struggle on its quaggy edges. The horse might have come from a distance! I galloped on, still calling. A few hundred yards further I detected the vivid glow of Chu Chu's scarlet saddle-blanket, in the brush near the trail. My heart leaped — I was on the track. I called again; this time a faint reply, in accents I knew too well, came from the field beside me!

Consuelo was there! reclining beside a manzanita bush which screened her from the road, in what struck me, even at that supreme moment, as a judicious and picturesquely selected couch of scented Indian grass and dry tussocks. The velvet hat with its balls of scarlet plush was laid carefully aside; her lovely blue-black hair retained its tight coils undisheveled, her eyes were luminous and tender. Shocked as I was at her apparent helplessness, I remember being impressed with the fact that it gave so little indication of violent usage or disaster.

I threw myself frantically on the ground beside her.

"You are hurt, Consita! For Heaven's sake, what has happened?"

She pushed my hat back with her little hand, and tumbled my hair gently.

"Nothing. *You* are here, Pancho — eet is enofe! What shall come after thees — when I am perhaps gone among the grave — make nothing! *You* are here — I am happy. For a little, perhaps — not mooch."

"But," I went on desperately, "was it an accident? Were you thrown? Was it Chu Chu?" — for somehow, in spite of her languid posture and voice, I could not, even in my fears, believe her seriously hurt.

"Beat not the poor beast, Pancho. It is not from *her* comes thees thing. She have make nothing — believe me! I have come upon your assignation with Miss Essmith! I make but to pass you — to fly — to never come back! I have say to Chu Chu, 'Fly!' We fly many miles. Sometimes together, sometimes not so mooch! Sometimes in the saddle, sometimes on the neck! Many things remain in the road; at the end, I myself remain! I have say, 'Courage, Pancho will come!' Then I say, 'No, he is talk with Miss Essmith!' I remember not more. I have creep here on the hands. Eet is feenish!"

I looked at her distractedly. She smiled tenderly, and slightly smoothed down and rearranged a fold of her dress to cover her delicate little boot.

"But," I protested, "you are not much hurt, dearest. You have broken no bones. Perhaps," I added, looking at the boot, "only a slight sprain. Let me carry you to my horse; I will walk beside you, home. Do, dearest Consita!"

She turned her lovely eyes towards me sadly.

"You comprehend not, my poor Pancho! It is not of the foot, the ankle, the arm, or the head that I can say, 'She is broke!' I would it were even so. But" — she lifted her sweet lashes slowly — "I have derrange my inside. It is an affair of my family. My grandfather have once toomble over the bull at a rodeo. He speak no more; he is dead. For why? He has derrange his inside. Believe me, it is of the family. You comprehend? The Saltellos are not as the other peoples for this. When I am gone, you will bring to me the berry to grow upon my tomb, Pancho; the berry you have picked for me. The little flower will come too, the little star will arrive, but Consuelo, who lofe you, she will come not more! When you are happy and talk in the road to the Essmith, you will not think of me. You will not see my eyes, Pancho; thees little grass" — she ran her plump little fingers through a tussock — "will hide them; and the small animals in the black coats that lif here will have much sorrow — but you will not. It ees better so! My father will not that I, a Catholique, should marry into a camp-meeting, and lif in a tent, and make howl like the coyote." (It was one of Consuelo's bewildering beliefs that there was only one form of dissent, — Methodism!) "He will not that I should marry a man who possess not the many horses, ox, and cow, like him. But *I* care not. *You* are my only religion, Pancho! I have enofe of the horse, and ox, and cow when *you* are with me! Kiss me, Pancho. Perhaps it is for the last time — the feenish! Who knows?"

There were tears in her lovely eyes; I felt that my own were growing dim; the sun was sinking over the dreary plain to the slow rising of the wind; an infinite loneliness had fallen upon us, and yet I was miserably conscious of some dreadful unreality in it all. A desire to laugh, which I felt must be hysterical, was creeping over me; I dared not speak. But her dear head was on my shoulder, and the situation was not unpleasant.

Nevertheless, something must be done! This was the more difficult as it was by no means clear what had already been done. Even while I supported her drooping figure I was straining my eyes across her shoulder for succor of some kind. Suddenly the figure of a rapid rider appeared upon the road. It seemed familiar. I looked again — it was the blessed Enriquez! A sense of deep relief came over me. I loved Consuelo; but never before had lover ever hailed the irruption of one of his beloved's family with such complacency.

"You are safe, dearest; it is Enriquez!"

I thought she received the information coldly. Suddenly she turned upon me her eyes, now bright and glittering.

"Swear to me at the instant, Pancho, that you will not again look upon Miss Essmith, even for once."

I was simple and literal. Miss Smith was my nearest neighbor, and, unless I was stricken with blindness, compliance was impossible. I hesitated — but swore.

"Enofe — you have hesitate — I will no more."

She rose to her feet with grave deliberation. For an instant, with the recollection of the delicate internal organization of the Saltellos on my mind, I was in agony lest she should totter and fall, even then, yielding up her gentle spirit on the spot. But when I looked again she had a hairpin between her white teeth, and was carefully adjusting her toreador hat. And beside us was Enriquez — cheerful, alert, voluble, and undaunted.

"Eureka! I have found! We are all here! Eet is a leetle public — eh ? a leetle to much of a front seat for a tête-à-tête, my yonge friends," he said, glancing at the remains of Consuelo's bower, "but for the accounting of taste there is none. What will you ? The meat of the one man shall envenom the meat of the other. But" (in a whisper to me) "as to thees horse — thees Chu Chu, which I have just pass — why is she undress ? Surely you would not make an exposition of her to the traveler to suspect ! And if not, why so ?"

I tried to explain, looking at Consuelo, that Chu Chu had run away, that Consuelo had met with a terrible accident, had been thrown, and I feared had suffered serious internal injury. But to my embarrassment Consuelo maintained a half-scornful silence, and an inconsistent freshness of healthful indifference, as Enriquez approached her with an engaging smile.

"Ah, yes, she have the headache, and the molligrubs. She will sit on the damp stone when the gentle dew is falling. I comprehend. Meet me in the lane when the clock strike nine ! But," in a lower voice, "of thees undress horse I comprehend nothing ! Look you — it is sad and strange."

He went off to fetch Chu Chu, leaving me and Consuelo alone. I do not think I ever felt so utterly abject and bewildered before in my life. Without knowing why, I was miserably conscious of having in some way offended the girl for whom I believed I would have given my life, and I had made her and myself ridiculous in the eyes of her brother. I had again failed in my slower Western nature to understand her high romantic Spanish soul ! Meantime she was smoothing out her riding-habit, and looking as fresh and pretty as when she first left her house.

"Consita," I said hesitatingly, "you are not angry with me ?"

"Angry ?" she repeated haughtily, without looking at me. "Oh, no! Of a possibility eet is Mees Essmith who is angry that I have interroopt her tête-à-tête with you, and have send here my brother to make the same with me."

"But," I said eagerly, "Miss Smith does not even know Enriquez!"

Consuelo turned on me a glance of unutterable significance.

"Ah!" she said darkly, "you *tink!*"

Indeed I *knew*. But here I believed I understood Consuelo, and was relieved. I even ventured to say gently, "And you are better?"

She drew herself up to her full height, which was not much.

"Of my health, what is it? A nothing. Yes! Of my soul let us not speak."

Nevertheless, when Enriquez appeared with Chu Chu she ran towards her with outstretched arms. Chu Chu protruded about six inches of upper lip in response — apparently under the impression, which I could quite understand, that her mistress was edible. And, I may have been mistaken, but their beautiful eyes met in an absolute and distinct glance of intelligence!

During the home journey Consuelo recovered her spirits, and parted from me with a magnanimous and forgiving pressure of the hand. I do not know what explanation of Chu Chu's original escapade was given to Enriquez and the rest of the family; the inscrutable forgiveness extended to me by Consuelo precluded any further inquiry on my part. I was willing to leave it a secret between her and Chu Chu. But, strange to say, it seemed to complete our own understanding, and precipitated, not only our love-making, but the final catastrophe which culminated that romance. For we had resolved to elope. I do not know that this heroic remedy was absolutely necessary from the attitude of either

Consuelo's family or my own; I am inclined to think we preferred it, because it involved no previous explanation or advice. Need I say that our confidant and firm ally was Consuelo's brother — the alert, the linguistic, the ever happy, ever ready Enriquez! It was understood that his presence would not only give a certain mature respectability to our performance — but I do not think we would have contemplated this step without it. During one of our riding excursions we were to secure the services of a Methodist minister in the adjoining county, and later, that of the mission padre — when the secret was out.

"I will gif her away," said Enriquez confidently; "it will on the instant propitiate the old shadbelly who shall perform the affair, and withhold his jaw. A little chin music from your oncle 'Arry shall finish it! Remain tranquil and forget not a ring! One does not always, in the agony and dissatisfaction of the moment, a ring remember. I shall bring two in the pocket of my dress."

If I did not entirely participate in this roseate view it may have been because Enriquez, although a few years my senior, was much younger-looking, and with his demure deviltry of eye, and his upper lip close shaven for this occasion, he suggested a depraved acolyte rather than a responsible member of a family. Consuelo had also confided to me that her father — possibly owing to some rumors of our previous escapade — had forbidden any further excursions with me alone. The innocent man did not know that Chu Chu had forbidden it also, and that even on this momentous occasion both Enriquez and myself were obliged to ride in opposite fields like out-flankers. But we nevertheless felt the full guilt of disobedience added to our desperate enterprise. Meanwhile, although pressed for time, and subject to discovery at any moment, I managed at certain points of the road to dismount and walk beside Chu Chu (who did not seem to recognize me on foot), holding Consuelo's hand in my own, with the discreet Enriquez leading my horse in the distant field. I retain a very vivid picture of that walk — the ascent of a gentle slope towards a prospect as yet unknown, but full of glorious possibilities; the tender dropping light of an autumn sky, slightly filmed with the promise of the future rains, like foreshadowed tears, and the half-frightened, half-serious talk into which Consuelo and I had insensibly fallen. And then, I don't know how it happened, but as we reached the summit Chu Chu suddenly reared, wheeled, and the next moment was flying back along the road we had just traveled, at the top of her speed! It might have been that, after her abstracted fashion, she only at that moment detected my presence; but so sudden and complete was her evolution that before I could regain my horse from the astonished Enriquez she was already a quarter of a mile on the homeward stretch, with the frantic Consuelo pulling hopelessly at the bridle. We started in pursuit. But a horrible despair seized us. To attempt to overtake her, to even follow at the same rate of speed, would only excite Chu Chu and endanger Consuelo's life. There was absolutely no help for it, nothing could be done; the mare had taken her determined long, continuous stride; the road was a straight, steady descent all the way back to the village; Chu Chu had the bit between her teeth, and there was no prospect of swerving her. We could only follow hopelessly, idiotically, furiously, until Chu Chu dashed triumphantly into the Saltellos' courtyard, carrying the half-fainting Consuelo back to the arms of her assembled and astonished family.

It was our last ride together. It was the last I ever saw of Consuelo before her transfer to the safe seclusion of a convent in Southern California. It was the last I ever saw of Chu Chu, who in the confusion of that rencontre was overlooked in her half-loosed harness, and allowed to escape through the back gate to the fields. Months afterwards it was said that she had been identified among a band of wild horses in the Coast Range, as a strange and beautiful creature who had escaped the brand of the rodeo and had become a myth. There was another legend that she had been seen, sleek, fat, and gorgeously caparisoned, issuing from the gateway of the Rosario patio, before a lumbering Spanish cabriolé in which a short, stout matron was seated — but I will have none of it. For there are days when she still lives, and I can see her plainly still climbing the gentle slope towards the summit, with Consuelo on her back, and myself at her side, pressing eagerly forward towards the illimitable prospect that opens in the distance.

THE DEVOTION OF ENRIQUEZ

In another chronicle which dealt with the exploits of Chu Chu, a Californian mustang, I gave some space to the accomplishments of Enriquez Saltello, who assisted me in training her, and who was also brother to Consuelo Saltello, the young lady to whom I had freely given both the mustang and my youthful affections. I consider it a proof of the superiority of masculine friendship that neither the subsequent desertion of the mustang nor the young lady ever made the slightest difference to Enriquez or me in our exalted amity. To a wondering doubt as to what I ever could possibly have seen in his sister to admire he joined a tolerant skepticism of the whole sex. This he was wont to express in that marvelous combination of Spanish precision and California slang for which he was justly famous.

"As to thees women and their little game," he would say, "believe me, my friend, your old oncle 'Enry is not in it. No; he will ever take a back seat when lofe is around. For why? Regard me here! If she is a horse you shall say, 'She will buck-jump,' 'She will ess-shy,' 'She will not arrive,' or 'She will arrive too quick.' But if it is thees women, where are you? For when you shall say, 'She will ess-shy,' look you, she will walk straight; or she will remain tranquil when you think she buck-jump; or else she will arrive and, look you, you will not. You shall get left. It is ever so. My father and the brother of my father have both make court to my mother when she was but a señorita. My father think she have lofe his brother more. So he say to her: 'It is enofe; tranquilize yourself. I will go. I will efface myself. Adios! Shake hands! Ta-ta! So long! See you again in the fall.' And what make my mother? Regard me! She marry my father — on the instant! Of thees women, believe me, Pancho, you shall know nothing. Not even if they shall make you the son of your father or his nephew."

I have recalled this characteristic speech to show the general tendency of Enriquez's convictions at the opening of this little story. It is only fair to say, however, that his usual attitude toward the sex he so cheerfully maligned exhibited little apprehension or caution in dealing with them. Among the frivolous and light-minded intermixture of his race he moved with great freedom and popularity. He danced well; when we went to fandangoes together his agility and the audacity of his figures always procured him the prettiest partners, his professed sentiments, I presume, shielding him from subsequent jealousies, heart-burnings, or envy. I have a vivid recollection of him in the mysteries of the semicuacua, a somewhat corybantic dance which left much to the invention of the performers, and very little to the imagination of the spectator. In one of the figures a gaudy handkerchief, waved more or less gracefully by dancer and danseuse before the dazzled eyes of each other, acted as love's signal, and was used to express alternate admiration and indifference, shyness and audacity, fear and transport, coyness and coquetry, as the dance proceeded. I need not say that Enriquez's pantomimic illustration of these emotions was peculiarly extravagant; but it was always performed and accepted with a gravity that was an essential feature of the dance. At such times sighs would escape him which were supposed to portray the incipient stages of passion; snorts of jealousy burst from him at the suggestion of a rival; he was overtaken by a sort of St. Vitus's dance that expressed his timidity in making the first advances of affection; the scorn of his lady-love struck him with something like a dumb ague; and a single gesture of invitation from her produced marked delirium. All this was very like Enriquez; but on the particular occasion to which I refer, I think no one was prepared to see him begin the figure with the waving of *four* handkerchiefs! Yet this he did, pirouetting, capering, brandishing his silken signals like a ballerina's scarf in the languishment or fire of passion, until, in a final figure, where the conquered and submitting fair one usually sinks into the arms of her partner, need it be said that the ingenious Enriquez was found in the centre of the floor supporting four of the dancers! Yet he was by no means unduly excited either by the plaudits of the crowd or by his evident success with the fair.

"Ah, believe me, it is nothing," he said quietly, rolling a fresh cigarette as he leaned against the doorway. "Possibly, I shall have to offer the chocolate or the wine to thees girls, or make to them a promenade in the moonlight on the veranda. It is ever so. Unless, my friend," he said, suddenly turning toward me in an excess of chivalrous self-abnegation, "unless you shall yourself take my place. Behold, I gif them to you! I vamos! I vanish! I make track! I skedaddle!"

I think he would have carried his extravagance to the point of summoning his four gypsy witches of partners, and committing them to my care, if the crowd had not at that moment parted before the remaining dancers, and left one of the onlookers, a tall, slender girl, calmly surveying them through gold-rimmed eye-glasses in complete critical absorption. I stared in amazement and consternation; for I recognized in the fair stranger Miss Urania Mannersley, the Congregational minister's niece!

Everybody knew Rainie Mannersley throughout the length and breadth of the Encinal. She was at once the envy and the goad of the daughters of those Southwestern and Eastern immigrants who had settled in the valley.

She was correct, she was critical, she was faultless and observant. She was proper, yet independent; she was highly educated; she was suspected of knowing Latin and Greek; she even spelled correctly! She could wither the plainest field nosegay in the hands of other girls by giving the flowers their botanical names. She never said, "Ain't you?" but "Are n't you?" She looked upon "Did I which?" as an incomplete and imperfect form of "What did I do?" She quoted from Browning and Tennyson, and was believed to have read them. She was from Boston. What could she possibly be doing at a free-and-easy fandango?

Even if these facts were not already familiar to every one there, her outward appearance would have attracted attention. Contrasted with the gorgeous red, black, and yellow skirts of the dancers, her plain, tightly fitting gown and hat, all of one delicate gray, were sufficiently notable in themselves, even had they not seemed, like the girl herself, a kind of quiet protest to the glaring flounces before her. Her small, straight waist and flat back brought into greater relief the corsetless, waistless, swaying figures of the Mexican girls, and her long, slim, well-booted feet peeping from the stiff, white edges of her short skirt, made their broad, low-quartered slippers, held on by the big toe, appear more preposterous than ever. Suddenly she seemed to realize that she was standing there alone, but without fear or embarrassment. She drew back a little, glancing carelessly behind her as if missing some previous companion, and then her eyes fell upon mine. She smiled an easy recognition; then, a moment later, her glance rested more curiously upon Enriquez, who was still by my side. I disengaged myself and instantly joined her, particularly as I noticed that a few of the other bystanders were beginning to stare at her with little reserve.

"Is n't it the most extraordinary thing you ever saw?"

she said quietly. Then, presently noticing the look of embarrassment on my face, she went on, more by way of conversation than of explanation: "I just left uncle making a call on a parishioner next door, and was going home with Jocasta" (a peon servant of her uncle's), "when I heard the music, and dropped in. I don't know what has become of her," she added, glancing round the room again; "she seemed perfectly wild when she saw that creature over there bounding about with his handkerchiefs. You were speaking to him just now. Do tell me — is he real?"

"I should think there was little doubt of that," I said with a vague laugh.

"You know what I mean," she said simply. "Is he quite sane? Does he do that because he likes it, or is he paid for it?"

This was too much. I pointed out somewhat hurriedly that he was a scion of one of the oldest Castilian families, that the performance was a national gypsy dance which he had joined in as a patriot and a patron, and that he was my dearest friend. At the same time I was conscious that I wished she had n't seen his last performance.

"You don't mean to say that all that he did was in the dance?" she said. "I don't believe it. It was only like him." As I hesitated over this palpable truth, she went on: "I do wish he 'd do it again. Don't you think you could make him?"

"Perhaps he might if *you* asked him," I said a little maliciously.

"Of course I should n't do that," she returned quietly. "All the same, I do believe he is really going to do it — or something else. Do look!"

I looked, and to my horror saw that Enriquez, possibly incited by the delicate gold eye-glasses of Miss Mannersley, had divested himself of his coat, and was winding the four handkerchiefs, tied together, picturesquely around his waist, preparatory to some new performance. I tried furtively to give him a warning look, but in vain.

"Is n't he really too absurd for anything!" said Miss Mannersley, yet with a certain comfortable anticipation in her voice. "You know, I never saw anything like this before. I would n't have believed such a creature could have existed."

Even had I succeeded in warning him, I doubt if it would have been of any avail. For, seizing a guitar from one of the musicians, he struck a few chords, and suddenly began to zigzag into the centre of the floor, swaying his body languishingly from side to side in time with the music and the pitch of a thin Spanish tenor. It was a gypsy love-song. Possibly Miss Mannersley's lingual accomplishments did not include a knowledge of Castilian, but she could not fail to see that the gestures and illustrative pantomime were addressed to her. Passionately assuring her that she was the most favored daughter of the Virgin, that her eyes were like votive tapers, and yet in the same breath accusing her of being a "brigand" and "assassin" in her attitude toward "his heart," he balanced with quivering timidity toward her, threw an imaginary cloak in front of her neat boots as a carpet for her to tread on, and with a final astonishing pirouette and a languishing twang of his guitar, sank on one knee, and blew, with a rose, a kiss at her feet.

If I had been seriously angry with him before for his grotesque extravagance, I could have pitied him now for the young girl's absolute unconsciousness of anything but his utter ludicrousness. The applause of dancers and bystanders was instantaneous and hearty; her only contribution to it was a slight parting of her thin red lips in a half-incredulous smile. In the silence that followed the applause, as Enriquez walked pantingly away, I heard her saying, half to herself, "Certainly a most extraordinary creature!" In my indignation I could not help turning suddenly upon her and looking straight into her eyes. They were brown, with that peculiar velvet opacity common to the pupils of near-sighted persons, and seemed to defy internal scrutiny. She only repeated carelessly, "Is n't he?" and added: "Please see if you can find Jocasta. I suppose we ought to be going now; and I dare say he won't be doing it again. Ah! there she is. Good gracious, child! what have you got there?"

It was Enriquez's rose which Jocasta had picked up, and was timidly holding out toward her mistress.

"Heavens! I don't want it. Keep it yourself."

I walked with them to the door, as I did not fancy a certain glitter in the black eyes of the Señoritas Manuela and Pepita, who were watching her curiously. But I think she was as oblivious of this as she was of Enriquez's particular attentions. As we reached the street I felt that I ought to say something more.

"You know," I began casually, "that although those poor people meet here in this public way, their gathering is really quite a homely pastoral and a national custom; and these girls are all honest, hard-working peons or servants, enjoying themselves in quite the old idyllic fashion."

"Certainly," said the young girl, half abstractedly. "Of course it's a Moorish dance, originally brought over, I suppose, by those old Andalusian immigrants two hundred years ago. It's quite Arabic in its suggestions. I have got something like it in an old cancionero I picked up at a bookstall in Boston. But," she added, with a gasp of reminiscent satisfaction, "that's not like *him!* Oh, no! *he* is decidedly original. Heavens! yes."

I turned away in some discomfiture to join Enriquez, who was calmly awaiting me, with a cigarette in his mouth, outside the sala. Yet he looked so unconscious of any previous absurdity that I hesitated in what I thought was a necessary warning. He, however, quickly precipitated it. Glancing after the retreating figures of the two women, he said, "Thees mees from Boston is return to her house. You do not accompany her? I shall. Behold me — I am there."

But I linked my arm firmly in his. Then I pointed out, first, that she was already accompanied by a servant; secondly, that if I, who knew her, had hesitated to offer myself as an escort, it was hardly proper for him, a perfect stranger, to take that liberty; that Miss Mannersley was very punctilious of etiquette, which he, as a Castilian gentleman, ought to appreciate.

"But will she not regard lofe — the admiration excessif?" he said, twirling his thin little mustache meditatively.

"No; she will not," I returned sharply; "and you ought to understand that she is on a different level from your Manuelas and Carmens."

"Pardon, my friend," he said gravely; "thees women are ever the same. There is a proverb in my language. Listen: 'Whether the sharp blade of the Toledo pierce the satin or the goatskin, it shall find behind it ever the same heart to wound.' I am that Toledo blade — possibly it is you, my friend. Wherefore, let us together pursue this girl of Boston on the instant."

But I kept my grasp on Enriquez's arm, and succeeded in restraining his mercurial impulses for the moment. He halted, and puffed vigorously at his cigarette; but the next instant he started forward again.

"Let us, however, follow with discretion in the rear; we shall pass her house; we shall gaze at it; it shall touch her heart."

Ridiculous as was this following of the young girl we had only just parted from, I nevertheless knew that Enriquez was quite capable of attempting it alone, and I thought it better to humor him by consenting to walk with him in that direction; but I felt it necessary to say: —

"I ought to warn you that Miss Mannersley already looks upon your performances at the sala as something outré and peculiar, and if I were you I should n't do anything to deepen that impression."

"You are saying she ees shock?" said Enriquez gravely.

I felt I could not conscientiously say that she was shocked, and he saw my hesitation.

"Then she have jealousy of the señoritas," he observed, with insufferable complacency. "You observe! I have already said. It is ever so."

I could stand it no longer.

"Look here, Harry," I said, "if you must know it, she looks upon you as an acrobat — a paid performer."

"Ah!" — his black eyes sparkled — "the torero, the man who fights the bull, he is also an acrobat."

"Yes; but she thinks you a clown! — a gracioso de teatro, — there!"

"Then I have make her laugh?" he said coolly.

I don't think he had; but I shrugged my shoulders.

"Bueno!" he said cheerfully. "Lofe, he begin with a laugh, he make feenish with a sigh."

I turned to look at him in the moonlight. His face presented its habitual Spanish gravity — a gravity that was almost ironical. His small black eyes had their characteristic irresponsible audacity — the irresponsibility of the vivacious young animal. It could not be possible that he was really touched with the placid frigidities of Miss Mannersley. I remembered his equally elastic gallantries with Miss Pinky Smith, a blond Western belle, from which both had harmlessly rebounded. As we walked on slowly I continued more persuasively: —

"Of course this is only your nonsense; but don't you see, Miss Mannersley thinks it all in earnest and really your nature?" I hesitated, for it suddenly struck me that it *was* really his nature. "And — hang it all! — you don't want her to believe you a common buffoon, or some intoxicated muchaco."

"Intoxicated?" repeated Enriquez, with exasperating languishment. "Yes; that is the word that shall express itself. My friend, you have made a shot in the centre — you have ring the bell every time! It is intoxication — but not of aguardiente. Look! I have long time an ancestor of whom is a pretty story. One day in church he have seen a young girl — a mere peasant girl — pass to the confessional. He look her in her eye, he stagger," — here Enriquez wobbled pantomimically into the road, — "he fall!" — he would have suited the action to the word if I had not firmly held him up. "They have take him home, where he have remain without his clothes, and have dance and sing. But it was the drunkenness of lofe. And, look you, thees village girl was a nothing, not even pretty. The name of my ancestor was" —

"Don Quixote de la Mancha," I suggested maliciously. "I suspected as much. Come along. That will do."

"My ancestor's name," continued Enriquez gravely, "was Antonio Hermenegildo de Salvatierra, which is not the same. Thees Don Quixote of whom you speak exist not at all."

"Never mind. Only, for Heaven's sake, as we are nearing the house, don't make a fool of yourself again."

It was a wonderful moonlight night. The deep redwood porch of the Mannersley parsonage, under the shadow of a great oak, — the largest in the Encinal, — was diapered in black and silver. As the women stepped upon the porch their shadows were silhouetted against the door. Miss Mannersley paused for an instant, and turned to give a last look at the beauty of the night as Jocasta entered. Her glance fell upon us as we passed. She nodded carelessly and unaffectedly to me, but as she recognized Enriquez she looked a little longer at him with her previous cold and invincible curiosity. To my horror Enriquez began instantly to affect a slight tremulousness of gait and a difficulty of breathing; but I gripped his arm savagely, and managed to get him past the house as the door closed finally on the young lady.

"You do not comprehend, friend Pancho," he said gravely, "but those eyes in their glass are as the espejo ustorio, the burning mirror. They burn, they consume me here like paper. Let us affix to ourselves thees tree. She will, without doubt, appear at her window. We shall salute her for good-night."

"We will do nothing of the kind," I said sharply.

Finding that I was determined, he permitted me to lead him away. I was delighted to notice, however, that he had indicated the window which I knew was the minister's study, and that as the bedrooms were in the rear of the house, this later incident was probably not overseen by the young lady or the servant. But I did not part from Enriquez until I saw him safely back to the sala, where I left him sipping chocolate, his arm alternating around the waists of his two previous partners in a delightful Arcadian and childlike simplicity, and an apparent utter forgetfulness of Miss Mannersley.

The fandangoes were usually held on Saturday night, and the next day, being Sunday, I missed Enriquez; but as he was a devout Catholic I remembered that he was at mass in the morning, and possibly at the bullfight at San Antonio in the afternoon. But I was somewhat surprised on the Monday morning following, as I was crossing the plaza, to have my arm taken by the Reverend Mr. Mannersley in the nearest approach to familiarity that was consistent with the reserve of this eminent divine. I looked at him inquiringly. Although scrupulously correct in attire, his features always had a singular resemblance to the national caricature known as "Uncle Sam," but with the humorous expression left out. Softly stroking his goatee with three fingers, he began condescendingly:—

"You are, I think, more or less familiar with the characteristics and customs of the Spanish as exhibited by the settlers here."

A thrill of apprehension went through me. Had he heard of Enriquez's proceedings? Had Miss Mannersley cruelly betrayed him to her uncle?

"I have not given that attention myself to their language and social peculiarities," he continued, with a large wave of the hand, "being much occupied with a study of their religious beliefs and superstitions,"—it struck me that this was apt to be a common fault of people of the Mannersley type,—"but I have refrained from a personal discussion of them; on the contrary, I have held somewhat broad views on the subject of their remarkable missionary work, and have suggested a scheme of coöperation with them, quite independent of doctrinal teaching, to my brethren of other Protestant Christian sects. These views I first incorporated in a sermon last Sunday week, which I am told has created considerable attention." He stopped and coughed slightly. "I have not yet heard from any of the Roman clergy, but I am led to believe that my remarks were not ungrateful to Catholics generally."

I was relieved, although still in some wonder why he should address me on this topic. I had a vague remembrance of having heard that he had said something on Sunday which had offended some Puritans of his flock, but nothing more.

He continued: "I have just said that I was unacquainted with the characteristics of the Spanish-American race. I presume, however, they have the impulsiveness of their Latin origin. They gesticulate—eh? They express their gratitude, their joy, their affection, their emotions generally, by spasmodic movements? They naturally dance — sing — eh?"

A horrible suspicion crossed my mind; I could only stare helplessly at him.

"I see," he said graciously; "perhaps it is a somewhat general question. I will explain myself. A rather singular occurrence happened to me the other night. I had returned from visiting a parishioner, and was alone in my study reviewing my sermon for the next day. It must have been quite late before I concluded, for I distinctly remember my niece had returned with her servant fully an hour before. Presently I heard the sounds of a musical instrument in the road, with the accents of some one singing or rehearsing some metrical composition in words that, although couched in a language foreign to me, in expression and modulation gave me the impression of being distinctly adulatory. For some little time, in the greater preoccupation of my task, I paid little attention to the performance; but its persistency at length drew me in no mere idle curiosity to the window. From thence, standing in my dressing-gown, and believing myself unperceived, I noticed under the large oak in the roadside the figure of a young man, who, by the imperfect light, appeared to be of Spanish extraction. But I evidently miscalculated my own invisibility; for he moved rapidly forward as I came to the window, and in a series of the most extraordinary pantomimic gestures saluted me. Beyond my experience of a few Greek plays in earlier days, I confess I am not an adept in the understanding of gesticulation; but it struck me that the various phases of gratitude, fervor, reverence, and exaltation were successively portrayed. He placed his hands upon his head, his heart, and even clasped them together in this manner."

To my consternation the reverend gentleman here imitated Enriquez's most extravagant pantomime.

"I am willing to confess," he continued, "that I was singularly moved by them, as well as by the highly creditable and Christian interest that evidently produced them. At last I opened the window. Leaning out, I told him that I regretted that the lateness of the hour prevented any further response from me than a grateful though hurried acknowledgment of his praiseworthy emotion, but that I should be glad to see him for a few moments in the vestry before service the next day, or at early candlelight, before the meeting of the Bible class. I told him that as my sole purpose had been the creation of an evangelical brotherhood and the exclusion of merely doctrinal views, nothing could be more gratifying to me than this spontaneous and unsolicited testimony to my motives. He appeared for an instant to be deeply affected, and, indeed, quite overcome with emotion, and then gracefully retired, with some agility and a slight saltatory movement."

He paused. A sudden and overwhelming idea took possession of me, and I looked impulsively into his face. Was it possible that for once Enriquez's ironical extravagance had been understood, met, and vanquished by a master hand? But the Reverend Mr. Mannersley's self-satisfied face betrayed no ambiguity or lurking humor. He was evidently in earnest; he had complacently accepted for himself the abandoned Enriquez's serenade to his niece. I felt an hysterical desire to laugh, but it was checked by my companion's next words.

"I informed my niece of the occurrence in the morning at breakfast. She had not heard anything of the strange performance, but she agreed with me as to its undoubted origin in a grateful recognition of my liberal efforts toward his co-religionists. It was she, in fact, who suggested that your knowledge of these people might corroborate my impressions."

I was dumfounded. Had Miss Mannersley, who must have recognized Enriquez's hand in this, concealed the fact in a desire to shield him? But this was so inconsistent with her utter indifference to him, except as a grotesque study, that she would have been more likely to tell her uncle all about his previous performance. Nor could it be that she wished to conceal her visit to the fandango. She was far too independent for that, and it was even possible that the reverend gentleman, in his desire to know more of Enriquez's compatriots, would not have objected. In my confusion I meekly added my conviction to hers, congratulated him upon his evident success, and slipped away.

But I was burning with a desire to see Enriquez and know all. He was imaginative but not untruthful. Unfortunately, I learned that he was just then following one of his erratic impulses, and had gone to a rodeo at his cousin's, in the foothills, where he was alternately exercising his horsemanship in catching and breaking wild cattle, and delighting his relatives with his incomparable grasp of the American language and customs, and of the airs of a young man of fashion. Then my thoughts recurred to Miss Mannersley. Had she really been oblivious that night to Enriquez's serenade? I resolved to find out, if I could, without betraying Enriquez. Indeed, it was possible, after all, that it might not have been he.

Chance favored me. The next evening I was at a party where Miss Mannersley, by reason of her position and quality, was a distinguished — I had almost written a popular — guest. But, as I have formerly stated, although the youthful fair of the Encinal were flattered by her casual attentions, and secretly admired her superior style and aristocratic calm, they were more or less uneasy under the dominance of her intelligence and education, and were afraid to attempt either confidence or familiarity. They were also singularly jealous of her, for although the average young man was equally afraid of her cleverness and candor, he was not above paying a tremulous and timid court to her for its effect upon her humbler sisters. This evening she was surrounded by her usual satellites, including, of course, the local notables and special guests of distinction. She had been discussing, I think, the existence of glaciers on Mount Shasta with a spectacled geologist, and had participated with charming frankness in a conversation on anatomy with the local doctor and a learned professor, when she was asked to take a seat at the piano. She played with remarkable skill and wonderful precision, but coldly and brilliantly. As she sat there in her subdued but perfectly fitting evening dress, her regular profile and short but slender neck firmly set upon her high shoulders, exhaling an atmosphere of refined puritanism and provocative intelligence, the utter incongruity of Enriquez's extravagant attentions, if ironical, and their equal hopelessness if not, seemed to me plainer than ever. What had this well-poised, coldly observant spinster to do with that quaintly ironic ruffler, that romantic cynic, that rowdy Don Quixote, that impossible Enriquez? Presently she ceased playing. Her slim, narrow slipper, revealing her thin ankle, remained upon the pedal; her delicate fingers were resting idly on the keys; her head was slightly thrown back, and her narrow eyebrows prettily knit toward the ceiling in an effort of memory.

"Something of Chopin's," suggested the geologist ardently.

"That exquisite sonata!" pleaded the doctor.

"Suthin' of Rubinstein. Heard him once," said a gentleman of Siskiyou. "He just made that pianner get up and howl. Play Rube."

She shook her head with parted lips and a slight touch of girlish coquetry in her manner. Then her fingers suddenly dropped upon the keys with a glassy tinkle; there were a few quick pizzicato chords, down went the low pedal with a monotonous strumming, and she presently began to hum to herself. I started, — as well I might, — for I recognized one of Enriquez's favorite and most extravagant guitar solos. It was audacious; it was barbaric; it was, I fear, vulgar. As I remembered it, — as he sang it, — it recounted the adventures of one Don Francisco, a provincial gallant and roisterer of the most objectionable type. It had one hundred and four verses, which Enriquez never spared me. I shuddered as in a pleasant, quiet voice the correct Miss Mannersley warbled in musical praise of the *pellejo*, or wine-skin, and a eulogy of the dice-box came caressingly from her thin red lips. But the company was far differently affected: the strange, wild air and wilder accompaniment were evidently catching; people moved towards the piano; somebody whistled the air from a distant corner; even the faces of the geologist and doctor brightened.

"A tarantella, I presume?" blandly suggested the doctor.

Miss Mannersley stopped, and rose carelessly from the piano.

"It is a Moorish gypsy song of the fifteenth century," she said dryly.

"It seemed sorter familiar, too," hesitated one of the young men timidly, "like as if — don't you know? — you had without knowing it, don't you know?" — he blushed slightly — "sorter picked it up somewhere."

"I 'picked it up,' as you call it, in the collection of mediæval manuscripts of the Harvard Library, and copied it," returned Miss Mannersly coldly, as she turned away.

But I was not inclined to let her off so easily. I presently made my way to her side.

"Your uncle was complimentary enough to consult me as to the meaning of the appearance of a certain exuberant Spanish visitor at his house the other night."

I looked into her brown eyes, but my own slipped off her velvety pupils without retaining anything.

Then she reinforced her gaze with a pince-nez, and said carelessly: —

"Oh, it's you? How are you? Well, could you give him any information?"

"Only generally," I returned, still looking into her eyes. "These people are impulsive. The Spanish blood is a mixture of gold and quicksilver."

She smiled slightly. "That reminds me of your volatile friend. He was mercurial enough, certainly. Is he still dancing?"

"And singing sometimes," I responded pointedly.

But she only added casually, "A singular creature," without exhibiting the least consciousness, and drifted away, leaving me none the wiser. I felt that Enriquez alone could enlighten me. I must see him.

I did, but not in the way I expected. There was a bullfight at San Antonio the next Saturday afternoon, the usual Sunday performance being changed in deference to the Sabbatical habits of the Americans. An additional attraction was offered in the shape of a bull and bear fight, also a concession to American taste, which had voted the bullfight "slow," and had averred that the bull "did not get a fair show." I am glad that I am able to spare the reader the usual realistic horrors, for in the Californian performances there was very little of the brutality that distinguished this function in the mother country. The horses were not miserable, worn-out hacks, but young and alert mustangs; and the display of horsemanship by the picadors was not only wonderful, but secured an almost absolute safety to horse and rider. I never saw a horse gored; although unskillful riders were sometimes thrown in wheeling quickly to avoid the bull's charge, they generally regained their animals without injury.

The Plaza de Toros was reached through the decayed and tile-strewn outskirts of an old Spanish village. It was a rudely built, oval amphitheatre, with crumbling, whitewashed adobe walls, and roofed only over portions of the gallery reserved for the provincial "notables," but now occupied by a few shopkeepers and their wives, with a sprinkling of American travelers and ranchmen. The impalpable adobe-dust of the arena was being whirled into the air by the strong onset of the afternoon trade-winds, which happily, however, helped also to dissipate a reek of garlic, and the acrid fumes of cheap tobacco rolled in corn-husk cigarettes. I was leaning over the second barrier, waiting for the meagre and circus-like procession to enter with the keys of the bull-pen, when my attention was attracted to a movement in the reserved gallery. A lady and gentleman of a quality that was evidently unfamiliar to the rest of the audience were picking their way along the rickety benches to a front seat. I recognized the geologist with some surprise, and the lady he was leading with still greater astonishment. For it was Miss Mannersley, in her precise, well-fitting walking-costume — a monotone of sober color among the parti-colored audience.

However, I was perhaps less surprised than the audience, for I was not only becoming as accustomed to the young girl's vagaries as I had been to Enriquez's extravagance, but I was also satisfied that her uncle might have given her permission to come, as a recognition of the Sunday concession of the management, as well as to conciliate his supposed Catholic friends. I watched her sitting there until the first bull had entered, and, after a rather brief play with the picadors and banderilleros, was dispatched. At the moment when the matador approached the bull with his lethal weapon I was not sorry for an excuse to glance at Miss Mannersley. Her hands were in her lap, her head slightly bent forward over her knees. I fancied that she, too, had dropped her eyes before the brutal situation; to my horror I saw that she had a drawing-book in her hand,

and was actually sketching it. I turned my eyes in preference to the dying bull.

The second animal led out for this ingenious slaughter was, however, more sullen, uncertain, and discomposing to his butchers. He accepted the irony of a trial with gloomy, suspicious eyes, and he declined the challenge of whirling and insulting picadors. He bristled with banderillas like a hedgehog, but remained with his haunches backed against the barrier, at times almost hidden in the fine dust raised by the monotonous stroke of his sullenly pawing hoof — his one dull, heavy protest. A vague uneasiness had infected his adversaries; the picadors held aloof, the banderilleros skirmished at a safe distance. The audience resented only the indecision of the bull. Galling epithets were flung at him, followed by cries of "Espada!" and, curving his elbow under his short cloak, the matador, with his flashing blade in hand, advanced and — stopped. The bull remained motionless.

For at that moment a heavier gust of wind than usual swept down upon the arena, lifted a suffocating cloud of dust, and whirled it around the tiers of benches and the balcony, and for a moment seemed to stop the performance. I heard an exclamation from the geologist, who had risen to his feet. I fancied I heard even a faint cry from Miss Mannersley; but the next moment, as the dust was slowly settling, we saw a sheet of paper in the air, that had been caught up in this brief cyclone, dropping, dipping from side to side on uncertain wings, until it slowly descended in the very middle of the arena. It was a leaf from Miss Mannersley's sketch-book, the one on which she had been sketching.

In the pause that followed it seemed to be the one object that at last excited the bull's growing but tardy ire. He glanced at it with murky, distended eyes; he snorted at it with vague yet troubled fury. Whether he detected his own presentment in Miss Mannersley's sketch, or whether he recognized it as an unknown and unfamiliar treachery in his surroundings, I could not conjecture; for the next moment the matador, taking advantage of the bull's concentration, with a complacent leer at the audience, advanced toward the paper. But at that instant a young man cleared the barrier into the arena with a single bound, shoved the matador to one side, caught up the paper, turned toward the balcony and Miss Mannersley with a gesture of apology, dropped gayly before the bull, knelt down before him with an exaggerated humility, and held up the drawing as if for his inspection.

A roar of applause broke from the audience, a cry of warning and exasperation from the attendants, as the goaded bull suddenly charged the stranger. But he sprang to one side with great dexterity, made a courteous gesture to the matador as if passing the bull over to him, and still holding the paper in his hand, re-leaped the barrier, and rejoined the audience in safety. I did not wait to see the deadly, dominant thrust with which the matador received the charging bull; my eyes were following the figure now bounding up the steps to the balcony, where with an exaggerated salutation he laid the drawing in Miss Mannersley's lap, and vanished. There was no mistaking that thin lithe form, the narrow black mustache, and gravely dancing eyes. The audacity of conception, the extravagance of execution, the quaint irony of the sequel, could belong to no one but Enriquez.

I hurried up to her as the six yoked mules dragged the carcass of the bull away. She was placidly putting up her book, the unmoved focus of a hundred eager and curious eyes. She smiled slightly as she saw me.

"I was just telling Mr. Briggs what an extraordinary creature it was, and how you knew him. He must have had great experience to do that sort of thing so cleverly and safely. Does he do it often? Of course, not just that. But does he pick up cigars and things that I see they throw to the matador? Does he belong to the management? Mr. Briggs thinks the whole thing was a feint to distract the bull," she added, with a wicked glance at the geologist, who, I fancied, looked disturbed.

"I am afraid," I said dryly, "that his act was as unpremeditated and genuine as it was unusual."

"Why afraid?"

It was a matter-of-fact question, but I instantly saw my mistake. What right had I to assume that Enriquez's attentions were any more genuine than her own easy indifference; and if I suspected that they were, was it fair in me to give my friend away to this heartless coquette?

"You are not very gallant," she said, with a slight laugh, as I was hesitating, and turned away with her escort before I could frame a reply.

But at least Enriquez was now accessible, and I should gain some information from him. I knew where to find him, unless he were still lounging about the building, intent upon more extravagance; but I waited until I saw Miss Mannersley and Briggs depart without further interruption.

The hacienda of Ramon Saltello, Enriquez's cousin, was on the outskirts of the village. When I arrived there I found Enriquez's pinto mustang steaming in the corral, and although I was momentarily delayed by the servants at the gateway, I was surprised to find Enriquez himself lying languidly on his back in a hammock in the patio. His arms were hanging down listlessly on each side as if in the greatest prostration, yet I could not resist the impression that the rascal had only just got into the hammock when he heard of my arrival.

"You have arrived, friend Pancho, in time," he said, in accents of exaggerated weakness. "I am absolutely exhaust. I am bursted, caved in, kerflummoxed. I have behold you, my friend, at the barrier. I speak not, I make no sign at the first, because I was on fire; I speak not at the feenish — for I am exhaust."

"I see; the bull made it lively for you."

He instantly bounded up in the hammock.

"The bull! Caramba! Not a thousand bulls! And thees one, look you, was a craven. I snap my fingers over his horn; I roll my cigarette under his nose."

"Well, then — what was it?"

He instantly lay down again, pulling up the sides of the hammock. Presently his voice came from its depths, appealing in hollow tones to the sky.

"He asks me — thees friend of my soul, thees brother of my life, thees Pancho that I lofe — what it was? He would that I should tell him why I am game in the legs, why I shake in the hand, crack in the voice, and am generally wipe out! And yet he, my pardner — thees Francisco — know that I have seen the mees from Boston! That I have gaze into the eye, touch the hand, and for the instant possess the picture that hand have drawn! It was a sublime picture, Pancho," he said, sitting up again suddenly, "and have kill the bull before our friend Pepe's sword have touch even the bone of hees back and make feenish of him."

"Look here, Enriquez," I said bluntly, "have you been serenading that girl?"

He shrugged his shoulders without the least embarrassment, and said: —

"Ah, yes. What would you? It is of a necessity."

"Well," I retorted, "then you ought to know that her uncle took it all to himself — thought you some grateful Catholic pleased with his religious tolerance."

He did not even smile. "Bueno," he said gravely. "That make something, too. In thees affair it is well to begin with the duenna. He is the duenna."

"And," I went on relentlessly, "her escort told her just now that your exploit in the bull-ring was only a trick to divert the bull, suggested by the management."

"Bah! her escort is a geologian. Naturally, she is to him as a stone."

I would have continued, but a peon interrupted us at this moment with a sign to Enriquez, who leaped briskly from the hammock, bidding me wait his return from a messenger in the gateway.

Still unsatisfied of mind I waited, and sat down in the hammock that Enriquez had quitted. A scrap of paper was lying in its meshes, which at first appeared to be of the kind from which Enriquez rolled his cigarettes; but as I picked it up to throw it away, I found it was of much firmer and stouter material. Looking at it more closely, I was surprised to recognize it as a piece of the tinted drawing-paper torn off the "block" that Miss Mannersley had used. It had been deeply creased at right angles as if it had been folded; it looked as if it might have been the outer half of a sheet used for a note.

It might have been a trifling circumstance, but it greatly excited my curiosity. I knew that he had returned the sketch to Miss Mannersley, for I had seen it in her hand. Had she given him another? And if so, why had it been folded to the destruction of the drawing? Or was it part of a note which he had destroyed? In the first impulse of discovery I walked quickly with it toward the gateway where Enriquez had disappeared, intending to restore it to him. He was just outside talking with a young girl. I started, for it was Jocasta — Miss Mannersley's maid.

With this added discovery came that sense of uneasiness and indignation with which we illogically are apt to resent the withholding of a friend's confidence, even in matters concerning only himself. It was no use for me to reason that it was no business of mine, that he was right in keeping a secret that concerned another — and a lady; but I was afraid I was even more meanly resentful because the discovery quite upset my theory of his conduct and of Miss Mannersley's attitude toward him.

I continued to walk on to the gateway, where I bade Enriquez a hurried good-by, alleging the sudden remembrance of another engagement, but without appearing to recognize the girl, who was moving away, when, to my further discomfiture, the rascal stopped me with an appealing wink, threw his arms around my neck, whispered hoarsely in my ear, "Ah! you see -- you comprehend — but you are the mirror of discretion!" and returned to Jocasta. But whether this meant that he had received a message from Miss Mannersley, or that he was trying to suborn her maid to carry one, was still uncertain. He was capable of either.

During the next two or three weeks I saw him frequently; but as I had resolved to try the effect of ignoring Miss Mannersley in our conversation, I gathered little further of their relations, and, to my surprise, after one or two characteristic extravagances of allusion, Enriquez dropped the subject, too. Only one afternoon, as we were parting, he said carelessly: —

"My friend, you are going to the casa of Mannersley to-night. I too have the honor of the invitation. But you will be my Mercury — my Leporello — you will take of me a message to thees Mees Boston, that I am crushed, desolated, prostrate, and flabbergasted — that I cannot arrive, for I have of that night to sit up with the grand-aunt of my brother-in-law, who has a quinsy to the death. It is sad."

This was the first indication I had received of Miss Mannersley's advances. I was equally surprised at Enriquez's refusal.

"Nonsense!" I said bluntly. "Nothing keeps you from going."

"My friend," returned Enriquez, with a sudden lapse into languishment that seemed to make him absolutely infirm, "it is everything that shall restrain me. I am not strong. I shall become weak of the knee and tremble under the eye of Mees Boston. I shall precipitate myself to the geologian by the throat. Ask me another conundrum that shall be easy."

He seemed idiotically inflexible, and did not go. But I did. I found Miss Mannersley exquisitely dressed and looking singularly animated and pretty. The lambent glow of her inscrutable eye as she turned towards me might have been flattering but for my uneasiness in regard to Enriquez. I delivered his excuses as naturally as I could. She stiffened for an instant, and seemed an inch higher.

"I am so sorry," she said at last in a level voice. "I thought he would have been so amusing. Indeed, I had hoped we might try an old Moorish dance together which I have found and was practicing."

"He would have been delighted, I know. It 's a great pity he did n't come with me," I said quickly; "but," I could not help adding, with emphasis on her words, "he is such an 'extraordinary creature,' you know."

"I see nothing extraordinary in his devotion to an aged relative," returned Miss Mannersley quietly, as she turned away, "except that it justifies my respect for his character."

I do not know why I did not relate this to him. Possibly I had given up trying to understand them; perhaps I was beginning to have an idea that he could take care of himself. But I was somewhat surprised a few days later when, after asking me to go with him to a rodeo at his uncle's he added composedly, "You will meet Mees Boston."

I stared, and but for his manner would have thought it part of his extravagance. For the rodeo — a yearly chase of wild cattle for the purpose of lassoing and branding them — was a rather brutal affair, and purely a man's function; it was also a family affair — a property stock-taking of the great Spanish cattle-owners — and strangers, particularly Americans, found it difficult to gain access to its mysteries and the festa that followed.

"But how did she get an invitation?" I asked. "You did not dare to ask" — I began.

"My friend," said Enriquez, with a singular deliberation, "the great and respectable Boston herself, and her serene, venerable oncle, and other Boston magnificoes, have of a truth done me the inexpressible honor to solicit of my degraded, papistical oncle that she shall come — that she shall of her own superior eye behold the barbaric customs of our race."

His tone and manner were so peculiar that I stepped quickly before him, laid my hands on his shoulders, and looked down into his face. But the actual devil which I now for the first time saw in his eyes went out of them suddenly, and he relapsed again in affected languishment in his chair.

"I shall be there, friend Pancho," he said, with a preposterous gasp. "I shall nerve my arm to lasso the bull, and tumble him before her at her feet. I shall throw the 'buck-jump' mustang at the same sacred spot. I shall pluck for her the buried chicken at full speed from the ground, and present it to her. You shall see it, friend Pancho. I shall be there."

He was as good as his word. When Don Pedro Amador, his uncle, installed Miss Mannersley, with Spanish courtesy, on a raised platform in the long valley where the rodeo took place, the gallant Enriquez selected a bull from the frightened and galloping herd, and, cleverly isolating him from the band, lassoed his hind legs, and threw him exactly before the platform where Miss Mannersley was seated. It was Enriquez who caught the unbroken mustang, sprang from his own saddle to the bare back of his captive, and with only the lasso for a bridle, halted him on rigid haunches at Miss Mannersley's feet. It was Enriquez who, in the sports that followed, leaned from his saddle at full speed, caught up the chicken buried to its head in the sand without wringing its neck, and tossed it unharmed and fluttering toward his mistress. As for her, she wore the same look of animation that I had seen in her face at our previous meeting. Although she did not bring her sketch-book with her, as at the bullfight, she did not shrink from the branding of the cattle, which took place under her very eyes.

Yet I had never seen her and Enriquez together; they had never, to my actual knowledge, even exchanged words. And now, although she was the guest of his uncle, his duties seemed to keep him in the field, and apart from her. Nor, as far as I could detect, did either apparently make any effort to have it otherwise. The peculiar circumstance seemed to attract no attention from any one else. But for what I alone knew — or thought I knew — of their actual relations, I should have thought them strangers.

But I felt certain that the festa which took place in the broad patio of Don Pedro's casa would bring them together. And later in the evening, as we were all sitting on the veranda watching the dancing of the Mexican women, whose white-flounced sayas were monotonously rising and falling to the strains of two melancholy harps, Miss Mannersley rejoined us from the house. She seemed to be utterly absorbed and abstracted in the barbaric dances, and scarcely moved as she leaned over the railing with her cheek resting on her hand. Suddenly she arose with a little cry.

"What is it?" asked two or three.

"Nothing — only I have lost my fan."

She had risen, and was looking abstractedly on the floor.

Half a dozen men jumped to their feet. "Let me fetch it," they said.

"No, thank you. I think I know where it is, and will go for it myself." She was moving away.

But Don Pedro interposed with Spanish gravity. Such a thing was not to be heard of in his casa. If the señorita would not permit *him* — an old man — to go for it, it must be brought by Enriquez, her cavalier of the day.

But Enriquez was not to be found. I glanced at Miss Mannersley's somewhat disturbed face, and begged her to let me fetch it. I thought I saw a flush of relief come into her pale cheek as she said, in a lower voice, "On the stone seat in the garden."

I hurried away, leaving Don Pedro still protesting. I knew the gardens, and the stone seat at an angle of the wall, not a dozen yards from the casa. The moon shone full upon it. There, indeed, lay the little gray-feathered fan. But close beside it, also, lay the crumpled, black, gold-embroidered riding-gauntlet that Enriquez had worn at the rodeo.

I thrust it hurriedly into my pocket, and ran back. As I passed through the gateway I asked a peon to send Enriquez to me. The man stared. Did I not know that Don Enriquez had ridden away two minutes ago?

When I reached the veranda, I handed the fan to Miss Mannersley without a word.

"Bueno," said Don Pedro gravely; "it is as well. There shall be no bones broken over the getting of it, for Enriquez, I hear, has had to return to the Encinal this very evening."

Miss Mannersley retired early. I did not inform her of my discovery, nor did I seek in any way to penetrate her secret. There was no doubt that she and Enriquez had been together, perhaps not for the first time; but what was the result of their interview? From the young girl's demeanor and Enriquez's hurried departure, I could only fear the worst for him. Had he been tempted into some further extravagance and been angrily rebuked, or had he avowed a real passion concealed under his exaggerated mask, and been deliberately rejected? I tossed uneasily half the night, following in my dreams my poor friend's hurrying hoof-beats, and ever starting from my sleep at what I thought was the sound of galloping hoofs.

I rose early, and lounged into the patio; but others were there before me, and a small group of Don Pedro's family were excitedly discussing something, and I fancied they turned away awkwardly and consciously as I approached. There was an air of indefinite uneasiness everywhere. A strange fear came over me with the chill of the early morning air. Had anything happened to Enriquez? I had always looked upon his extravagance as part of his playful humor. Could it be possible that under the sting of rejection he had made his grotesque threat of languishing effacement real? Surely Miss Mannersley would know or suspect something, if it were the case.

I approached one of the Mexican women and asked if the señorita had risen. The woman started, and looked covertly round before she replied. Did not Don Pancho know that Miss Mannersley and her maid had not slept in their beds that night, but had gone, none knew where?

For an instant I felt an appalling sense of my own responsibility in this suddenly serious situation, and hurried after the retreating family group. But as I entered the corridor a vaquero touched me on the shoulder. He had evidently just dismounted, and was covered with the dust of the road. He handed me a note written in pencil on a leaf from Miss Mannersley's sketch-book. It was in Enriquez's hand, and his signature was followed by his most extravagant rubric.

Friend Pancho. — When you read this line you shall of a possibility think I am no more. That is where you shall slip up, my little brother! I am much more — I am two times as much, for I have marry Miss Boston. At the mission church, at five of the morning, sharp! No cards shall be left! I kiss the hand of my venerable uncle-in-law. You shall say to him that we fly to the South wilderness as the combined evangelical missionary to the heathen! Miss Boston herself say this. Ta-ta! How are you now? Your own

Enriquez.

BULGER'S REPUTATION

We all remembered very distinctly Bulger's advent in Rattlesnake Camp. It was during the rainy season — a season singularly inducive to settled reflective impressions as we sat and smoked around the stove in Mosby's grocery. Like older and more civilized communities, we had our periodic waves of sentiment and opinion, with the exception that they were more evanescent with us, and, as we had just passed through a fortnight of dissipation and extravagance, owing to a visit from some gamblers and speculators, we were now undergoing a severe moral revulsion, partly induced by reduced finances and partly by the arrival of two families with grown-up daughters on the hill. It was raining, with occasional warm breaths, through the open window, of the southwest trades, redolent of the saturated spices of the woods and springing grasses, which perhaps were slightly inconsistent with the hot stove around which we had congregated. But the stove was only an excuse for our listless, gregarious gathering; warmth and idleness went well together, and it was currently accepted that we had caught from the particular reptile which gave its name to our camp much of it pathetic, life-long search for warmth, and its habit of indolently basking in it.

A few of us still went through the affectation of attempting to dry our damp clothes by the stove, and sizzling our wet boots against it; but as the same individuals calmly permitted the rain to drive in upon them through the open window without moving, and seemed to take infinite delight in the amount of steam they generated, even that pretense dropped. Crotalus himself, with his tail in a muddy ditch, and the sun striking cold fire from his slit eyes as he basked his head on a warm stone beside it, could not have typified us better.

Percy Briggs took his pipe from his mouth at last and said, with reflective severity: —

"Well, gentlemen, if we can't get the wagon road over here, and if we're going to be left out by the stagecoach company, we can at least straighten up the camp, and not have it look like a cross between a tenement alley and a broken-down circus. I declare, I was just sick when these two Baker girls started to make a short cut through the camp. Darned if they did n't turn round and take to the woods and the rattlers again afore they got half way. And that benighted idiot, Tom Rollins, standin' there in the ditch, spattered all over with slumgullion till he looked like a spotted tarrypin, wavin' his fins and sashaying backwards and forrards and sayin', 'This way, ladies; this way!'"

"*I* did n't," returned Tom Rollins, quite casually, without looking up from his steaming boots, — "*I* did n't start in night afore last to dance 'The Green Corn Dance' outer 'Hiawatha,' with feathers in my hair and a red blanket on my shoulders, round that family's new potato patch, in order that it might 'increase and multiply.' I did n't sing 'Sabbath Morning Bells' with an anvil accompaniment until twelve o'clock at night over at the Crossing, so that they might dream of their Happy Childhood's Home. It seems to me that it was n't *me* did it. I might be mistaken — it was late — but I have the impression that it was n't *me*."

From the silence that followed, this would seem to have been clearly a recent performance of the previous speaker, who, however, responded quite cheerfully: —

"An evenin' o' simple, childish gayety don't count. We've got to start in again *fair*. What we want here is to clear up and encourage decent immigration, and get rid o' gamblers and blatherskites that are makin' this yer camp their happy hunting ground. We don't want any more permiskus shootin'. We don't want any more paintin' the town red. We don't want any more swaggerin' galoots ridin' up to this grocery and emptyin' their six-shooters in the air afore they 'light. We want to put a stop to it peacefully and without a row — and we kin. We ain't got no bullies of our own to fight back, and they know it, so they know they won't get no credit bullyin' us; they 'll leave if we 're only firm. It 's all along of our cussed fool good nature; they see it amuses us, and they 'll keep it up as long as the whiskey 's free. What we want to do is, when the next man comes waltzin' along" —

A distant clatter from the rocky hillside here mingled with the puff of damp air through the window.

"Looks as ef we might hev a show even now," said Tom Rollins, removing his feet from the stove as we all instinctively faced towards the window.

"I reckon you 're in with us in this, Mosby?" said Briggs, turning towards the proprietor of the grocery, who had been leaning listlessly against the wall behind his bar.

"Arter the man's had a fair show," said Mosby cautiously. He deprecated the prevailing condition of things, but it was still an open question whether the families would prove as valuable customers as his present clients. "Everything in moderation, gentlemen."

The sound of galloping hoofs came nearer, now swishing in the soft mud of the highway, until the unseen rider pulled up before the door. There was no shouting, however, nor did he announce himself with the usual salvo of firearms. But when, after a singularly heavy tread and the jingle of spurs on the platform, the door flew open to the new-comer, he seemed a realization of our worst expectations. Tall, broad, and muscular, he carried in one hand a shotgun, while from his hip dangled a heavy navy revolver. His long hair, unkempt but oiled, swept a greasy circle around his shoulders; his enormous mustache, dripping with wet, completely concealed his mouth. His costume of fringed buckskin was wild and outré even for our frontier camp. But what was more confirmative of our suspicions was that he was evidently in the habit of making an impression, and after a distinct pause at the doorway, with only a side glance at us, he strode toward the bar.

"As there don't seem to be no hotel hereabouts, I reckon I kin put up my mustang here and have a shakedown somewhere behind that counter," he said. His voice seemed to have added to its natural depth the hoarseness of frequent overstraining.

"Ye ain't got no bunk to spare, you boys, hev ye?" asked Mosby evasively, glancing at Percy Briggs, without looking at the stranger. We all looked at Briggs also; it was *his* affair after all — *he* had originated this opposition. To our surprise he said nothing.

The stranger leaned heavily on the counter.

"I was speaking to *you*," he said, with his eyes on Mosby, and slightly accenting the pronoun with a tap of his revolver-butt on the bar. "Ye don't seem to catch on."

Mosby smiled feebly, and again cast an imploring glance at Briggs. To our greater astonishment, Briggs said quietly: —

"Why don't you answer the stranger, Mosby?"

"Yes, yes," said Mosby suavely to the new-comer, while an angry flush crossed his cheek as he recognized the position in which Briggs had placed him. "Of course, you 're welcome to what doings *I* hev here, but I reckoned these gentlemen over there," with a vicious glance at Briggs, "might fix ye up suthin' better; they 're so pow'ful kind to your sort."

The stranger threw down a gold-piece on the counter and said: "Fork out your whiskey, then," waited until his glass was filled, took it in his hand, and then, drawing an empty chair to the stove, sat down beside Briggs. "Seein' as you 're that kind," he said, placing his heavy hand on Briggs's knee, "mebbe ye kin tell me ef thar 's a shanty or a cabin at Rattlesnake that I kin get for a couple o' weeks. I saw an empty one at the head o' the hill. You see, gennelmen," he added confidentially, as he swept the drops of whiskey from his long mustache with his fingers, and glanced around our group, "I 've got some business over at Bigwood," — our nearest town, — "but ez a place to *stay at* it ain't my style."

"What 's the matter with Bigwood?" said Briggs abruptly.

"It 's too howlin', too festive, too rough; thar 's too much yellin' and shootin' goin' day and night. Thar 's too many card-sharps and gay gamboliers cavortin' about the town to please me. Too much permiskus soakin' at the bar and free jim-jams. What I want is a quiet place what a man kin give his mind and elbow a rest from betwixt grippin' his shootin'-irons and crookin' in his whiskey, — a sort o' slow, quiet, easy place *like this.*"

We all stared at him, Percy Briggs as fixedly as any. But there was not the slightest trace of irony, sarcasm, or peculiar significance in his manner. He went on slowly: —

"When I struck this yer camp a minit ago; when I seed that thar ditch meanderin' peaceful-like through the street, without a hotel or free saloon or express office on either side; with the smoke just a-curlin' over the chimbley of that log shanty, and the bresh just set fire to and a-smoulderin' in that potato patch with a kind o' oldtime stingin' in your eyes and nose, and a few women's duds just a-flutterin' on a line by the fence, I says to myself: 'Bulger — this is peace! This is wot you 're lookin' for, Bulger — this is wot you 're wantin' — this is wot *you 'll hev!*'"

"You say you've business over at Bigwood. What business?" said Briggs.

"It's a peculiar business, young fellow," returned the stranger gravely. "Thar's different men ez has different opinions about it. Some allows it's an easy business, some allows it's a rough business; some says it's a sad business, others says it's gay and festive. Some wonders ez how I've got into it, and others wonder how I'll ever get out of it. It's a payin' business — it's a peaceful sort o' business when left to itself. It's a peculiar business — a business that sort o' b'longs to me, though I ain't got no patent from Washington for it. It's *my own* business." He paused, rose, and saying, "Let's meander over and take a look at that empty cabin, and ef she suits me, why, I'll plank down a slug for her on the spot, and move in to-morrow," walked toward the door. "I'll pick up suthin' in the way o' boxes and blankets from the grocery," he added, looking at Mosby, "and ef thar's a corner whar I kin stand my gun and a nail to hang up my revolver — why, I'm all thar!"

By this time we were no longer astonished when Briggs rose also, and not only accompanied the sinister-looking stranger to the empty cabin, but assisted him in negotiating with its owner for a fortnight's occupancy. Nevertheless, we eagerly assailed Briggs on his return for some explanation of this singular change in his attitude toward the stranger. He coolly reminded us, however, that while his intention of excluding ruffianly adventurers from the camp remained the same, he had no right to go back on the stranger's sentiments, which were evidently in accord with our own, and although Mr. Bulger's appearance was inconsistent with them, that was only an additional reason why we should substitute a mild firmness for that violence which we all deprecated, but which might attend his abrupt dismissal. We were all satisfied except Mosby, who had not yet recovered from Briggs's change of front, which he was pleased to call "crawfishing." "Seemed to me his account of his business was extraordinary satisfactory! Sorter filled the bill all round — no mistake thar," — he suggested, with a malicious irony. "I like a man that 's outspoken."

"I understood him very well," said Briggs quietly.

"In course you did. Only when you 've settled in *your* mind whether he was describing horse-stealing or tract-distributing, mebbe you 'll let *me* know."

It would seem, however, that Briggs did not interrogate the stranger again regarding it, nor did we, who were quite content to leave matters in Briggs's hands. Enough that Mr. Bulger moved into the empty cabin the next day, and, with the aid of a few old boxes from the grocery, which he quickly extemporized into tables and chairs, and the purchase of some necessary cooking-utensils, soon made himself at home. The rest of the camp, now thoroughly aroused, made a point of leaving their work in the ditches, whenever they could, to stroll carelessly around Bulger's tenement in the vague hope of satisfying a curiosity that had become tormenting. But they could not find that he was doing anything of a suspicious character — except, perhaps, from the fact that it was not *outwardly* suspicious, which I grieve to say did not lull them to security. He seemed to be either fixing up his cabin or smoking in his doorway. On the second day he checked this itinerant curiosity by taking the initiative himself, and quietly walking from claim to claim, and from cabin to cabin, with a pacific but by no means a satisfying interest. The shadow of his tall figure carrying his inseparable gun, which had not yet apparently "stood in the corner," falling upon an excavated bank beside the delving miners, gave them a sense of uneasiness they could not explain; a few characteristic yells of boisterous hilarity from their noontide gathering under a cottonwood somehow ceased when Mr. Bulger was seen gravely approaching, and his casual stopping before a poker party in the gulch actually caused one of the most reckless gamblers to weakly recede from "a bluff" and allow his adversary to sweep the board. After this it was felt that matters were becoming serious. There was no subsequent patroling of the camp before the stranger's cabin. Their curiosity was singularly abated. A general feeling of repulsion, kept within bounds partly by the absence of any overt act from Bulger, and partly by an inconsistent over-consciousness of his shotgun, took its place. But an unexpected occurrence revived it.

One evening, as the usual social circle were drawn around Mosby's stove, the lazy silence was broken by the familiar sounds of pistol-shots and a series of more familiar shrieks and yells from the rocky hill road. The circle quickly recognized the voices of their old friends the roisterers and gamblers from Sawyer's Dam; they as quickly recognized the returning shouts here and there from a few companions who were welcoming them. I grieve to say that in spite of their previous attitude of reformation a smile of gratified expectancy lit up the faces of the younger members, and even the older ones glanced dubiously at Briggs. Mosby made no attempt to conceal a sigh of relief as he carefully laid out an extra supply of glasses in his bar. Suddenly the oncoming yells ceased, the wild gallop of hoofs slackened into a trot, and finally halted, and even the responsive shouts of the camp stopped also. We all looked vacantly at each other; Mosby leaped over his counter and went to the door; Briggs followed with the rest of us. The night was dark, and it was a few minutes before we could distinguish a straggling, vague, but silent procession moving through the moist, heavy air on the hill. But, to our surprise, it was moving *away* from us — absolutely *leaving* the camp! We were still staring in expectancy when out of the darkness slowly emerged a figure which we recognized at once as Captain Jim, one of the most reckless members of our camp. Pushing us back into the grocery he entered without a word, closed the door behind him, and threw himself vacantly into a chair. We at once pressed around him. He looked up at us dazedly, drew a long breath, and said slowly : —

"It 's no use, gentlemen ! Suthin 's *got* to be done with that Bulger, and mighty quick."

"What 's the matter ?" we asked eagerly.

"Matter !" he repeated, passing his hand across his forehead, — "matter ! Look yere ! Ye all of you heard them boys from Sawyer's Dam coming over the hill ? Ye heard their music — mebbe ye heard *us* join in the chorus ? Well, on they came waltzing down the hill, like old times, and we waitin' for 'em. Then, jest as they passed the old cabin, who do you think they ran right into — shooting-iron, long hair and mustache, and all that — standing there plump in the road ? — why, Bulger !"

"Well ?"

"Well ! Whatever it was — don't ask *me* — but, dern my skin, ef after a word or two from *him* — them boys just stopped yellin', turned round like lambs, and rode away, peaceful-like, along with him. We ran after them a spell, still yellin', when that thar Bulger faced around, said to us that he 'd 'come down here for quiet,' and ef he could n't hev it he 'd have to leave with those gentlemen *who wanted it* too ! And I 'm gosh darned ef those *gentlemen* — you know 'em all — Patsey Carpenter, Snapshot Harry, and the others — ever said a darned word, but kinder nodded 'So long' and went away !"

Our astonishment and mystification were complete ; and I regret to say, the indignation of Captain Jim and Mosby equally so.

"If we 're going to be bossed by the first new-comer," said the former gloomily, "I reckon we might as well take our chances with the Sawyer's Dam boys, whom we know."

"Ef we are going to hev the legitimate trade of Rattlesnake interfered with by the cranks of some hidin' horse-thief or retired road-agent," said Mosby, "we might as well invite the hull of Joaquin Murietta's gang here at once! But I suppose this is part o' Bulger's particular 'business,'" he added, with a withering glance at Briggs.

"I understand it all," said Briggs quietly. "You know I told you that bullies could n't live in the same camp together. That 's human nature — and that 's how plain men like you and me manage to scud along without getting plugged. You see, Bulger was n't going to hev any of his own kind jumpin' his claim here. And I reckon he was pow'ful enough to back down Sawyer's Dam. Anyhow, the bluff told — and here we are in peace and quietness."

"Until he lets us know what *is* his little game," sneered Mosby.

Nevertheless, such is the force of mysterious power that, although it was exercised against what we firmly believed was the independence of the camp, it extorted a certain respect from us. A few thought it was not a bad thing to have a professional bully, and even took care to relate the discomfiture of the wicked youth of Sawyer's Dam for the benefit of a certain adjacent and powerful camp who had looked down upon us. He, himself, returning the same evening from his self-imposed escort, vouchsafed no other reason than the one he had already given. Preposterous as it seemed, we were obliged to accept it, and the still more preposterous inference that he had sought Rattlesnake Camp solely for the purpose of acquiring and securing its peace and quietness. Certainly he had no other occupation; the little work he did upon the tailings of the abandoned claim which went with his little cabin was scarcely a pretense. He rode over on certain days to Bigwood on account of his business, but no one had ever seen him there, nor could the description of his manner and appearance evoke any information from the Bigwoodians. It remained a mystery.

It had also been feared that the advent of Bulger would intensify that fear and dislike of riotous Rattlesnake which the two families had shown, and which was the origin of Briggs's futile attempt at reformation. But it was discovered that since his arrival the young girls had shown less timidity in entering the camp, and had even exchanged some polite conversation and good-humored badinage with its younger and more impressible members. Perhaps this tended to make these youths more observant, for a few days later, when the vexed question of Bulger's business was again under discussion, one of them remarked gloomily:—

"I reckon there ain't no doubt *what* he's here for!"

The youthful prophet was instantly sat upon after the fashion of all elderly critics since Job's. Nevertheless, after a pause he was permitted to explain.

"Only this morning, when Lance Forester and me were chirping with them gals out on the hill, who should we see hanging around in the bush but that cussed Bulger! We allowed at first that it might be only a new style of his interferin', so we took no notice, except to pass a few remarks about listeners and that sort o' thing, and perhaps to bedevil the girls a little more than we'd hev done if we'd been alone. Well, they laughed, and we laughed—and that was the end of it. But this afternoon, as Lance and me were meandering down by their cabin, we sorter turned into the woods to wait till they'd come out. Then all of a sudden Lance stopped as rigid as a pointer that's flushed somethin', and says, 'B'gosh!' And thar, under a big redwood, sat that slimy hypocrite Bulger, twisting his long mustaches and smiling like clockwork alongside o' little Meely Baker — you know her, the pootiest of the two sisters — and she smilin' back on him. Think of it! — that unknown, unwashed, long-haired tramp and bully, who must be forty if a day, and that innocent gal of sixteen. It was simply disgustin'!"

I need not say that the older cynics and critics already alluded to at once improved the occasion. What more could be expected? Women, the world over, were noted for this sort of thing! This long-haired, swaggering bully, with his air of mystery, had captivated them, as he always had done since the days of Homer. Simple merit, which sat lowly in bar-rooms, and conceived projects for the public good around the humble, unostentatious stove, was nowhere! Youth could not too soon learn this bitter lesson. And in this case youth too, perhaps, was right in its conjectures, for this *was*, no doubt, the little game of the perfidious Bulger. We recalled the fact that his unhallowed appearance in camp was almost coincident with the arrival of the two families. We glanced at Briggs; to our amazement, for the first time he looked seriously concerned. But Mosby in the mean time leaned his elbows lazily over the counter and, in a slow voice, added fuel to the flame.

"I would n't hev spoken of it before," he said, with a sidelong glance at Briggs, "for it might be all in the line o' Bulger's 'business,' but suthin' happened the other night that, for a minit, got me! I was passin' the Bakers' shanty, and I heard one of them gals a-singing a camp-meeting hymn. I don't calkilate to run agin you young fellers in any sparkin' or canoodlin' that 's goin' on, but her voice sounded so pow'ful soothin' and pretty thet I jest stood there and listened. Then the old woman — old Mother Baker — *she* joined in, and I listened too. And then — dern my skin! — but a man's voice joined in —

jest belching outer that cabin! — and I sorter lifted myself up and kem away.

"That voice, gentlemen," said Mosby, lingering artistically as he took up a glass and professionally eyed it before wiping it with his towel, "that voice, cumf'bly fixed thar in thet cabin among them wimen-folks, was Bulger's!"

Briggs got up, with his eyes looking the darker for his flushed face.

"Gentlemen," he said huskily, "thar 's only one thing to be done. A lot of us have got to ride over to Sawyer's Dam to-morrow morning and pick up as many square men as we can muster; there 's a big camp-meeting goin' on there, and there won't be no difficulty in that. When we 've got a big enough crowd to show we mean business, we must march back here and ride Bulger out of this camp! I don't hanker arter Vigilance Committees, as a rule — it 's a rough remedy — it 's like drinkin' a quart o' whiskey agin rattlesnake poison — but it 's got to be done! We don't mind being *sold* ourselves — but when it comes to our standin' by and seein' the only innocent people in Rattlesnake given away — we kick! Bulger 's got to be fired outer this camp! And he will be!"

But he was not.

For when, the next morning, a determined and thoughtful procession of the best and most characteristic citizens of Rattlesnake Camp filed into Sawyer's Dam, they found that their mysterious friends had disappeared, although they met with a fraternal but subdued welcome from the general camp. Any approach to the subject of their visit, however, was received with a chilling disapproval. Did they not know that lawlessness of any kind, even under the rude mantle of frontier justice, was to be deprecated and scouted when a "means of salvation, a power of regeneration," such as was now sweeping over Sawyer's Dam, was at hand? Could they not induce this man who was to be violently deported to accompany them willingly to Sawyer's Dam and subject himself to the powerful influence of the "revival" then in full swing?

The Rattlesnake boys laughed bitterly, and described the man of whom they talked so lightly; but in vain.

"It 's no use, gentlemen," said a more worldly bystander, in a lower voice, "the camp-meetin 's got a strong grip here, and betwixt you and me there ain't no wonder. For the man that runs it — the big preacher — has got new ways and methods that fetches the boys every time. He don't preach no cut-and-dried gospel; he don't carry around no slop-shop robes and clap 'em on you whether they fit or not; but he samples and measures the camp afore he wades into it. He scouts and examines; he ain't no mere Sunday preacher with a comfortable house and once-a-week church, but he gives up his days and nights to it, and makes his family work with him, and even sends 'em forward to explore the field. And he ain't no white-choker shadbelly either, but fits himself, like his gospel, to the men he works among. Ye ought to hear him afore you go. His tent is just out your way. I 'll go with you."

Too dejected to offer any opposition, and perhaps a little curious to see this man who had unwittingly frustrated their design of lynching Bulger, they halted at the outer fringe of worshipers who packed the huge inclosure. They had not time to indulge their cynicisms over this swaying mass of emotional, half-thinking, and almost irresponsible beings, nor to detect any similarity between *their* extreme methods and the scheme of redemption they themselves were seeking, for in a few moments, apparently lifted to his feet on a wave of religious exultation, the famous preacher arose. The men of Rattlesnake gasped for breath.

It was Bulger!

But Briggs quickly recovered himself.

"By what name," said he, turning passionately toward his guide, "does this man — this impostor — call himself here?"

"Baker."

"Baker?" echoed the Rattlesnake contingent.

"Baker?" repeated Lance Forester, with a ghastly smile.

"Yes," returned their guide. "You oughter know it too! For he sent his wife and daughters over, after his usual style, to sample your camp, a week ago! Come, now what are you givin' us?"

IN THE TULES

He had never seen a steamboat in his life. Born and reared in one of the western territories, far from a navigable river, he had only known the "dug-out" or canoe as a means of conveyance across the scant streams whose fordable waters made even those scarcely a necessity. The long, narrow, hooded wagon, drawn by swaying oxen, known familiarly as a "prairie schooner," in which he journeyed across the plains to California in '53, did not help his conception by that nautical figure. And when at last he dropped upon the land of promise through one of the Southern mountain passes he halted all unconsciously upon the low banks of a great yellow river amidst a tangled brake of strange, reed-like grasses that were unknown to him. The river, broadening as it debouched through many channels into a lordly bay, seemed to him the Ultima Thule of his journeyings. Unyoking his oxen on the edge of the luxuriant meadows which blended with scarcely any line of demarcation into the great stream itself, he found the prospect "good" according to his lights and prairial experiences, and, converting his halted wagon into a temporary cabin, he resolved to rest here and "settle."

There was little difficulty in so doing. The cultivated clearings he had passed were few and far between; the land would be his by discovery and occupation; his habits of loneliness and self-reliance made him independent of neighbors. He took his first meal in his new solitude under a spreading willow, but so near his natural boundary that the waters gurgled and oozed in the reeds but a few feet from him. The sun sank, deepening the gold of the river until it might have been the stream of Pactolus itself. But Martin Morse had no imagination; he was not even a gold-seeker; he had simply obeyed the roving instincts of the frontiersman in coming hither. The land was virgin and unoccupied; it was his; he was alone. These questions settled, he smoked his pipe with less concern over his three thousand miles' transference of habitation than the man of cities who had moved into a next street. When the sun sank, he rolled himself in his blankets in the wagon bed and went quietly to sleep.

But he was presently awakened by something which at first he could not determine to be a noise or an intangible sensation. It was a deep throbbing through the silence of the night — a pulsation that seemed even to be communicated to the rude bed whereon he lay. As it came nearer it separated itself into a labored, monotonous panting, continuous, but distinct from an equally monotonous but fainter beating of the waters, as if the whole track of the river were being coursed and trodden by a multitude of swiftly trampling feet. A strange feeling took possession of him — half of fear, half of curious expectation. It was coming nearer. He rose, leaped hurriedly from the wagon, and ran to the bank. The night was dark; at first he saw nothing before him but the steel-black sky pierced with far-spaced, irregularly scattered stars. Then there seemed to be approaching him, from the left, another and more symmetrical constellation — a few red and blue stars high above the river, with three compact lines of larger planetary lights flashing towards him and apparently on his own level. It was almost upon him; he involuntarily drew back as the strange phenomenon swept abreast of where he stood, and resolved itself into a dark yet airy bulk, whose vagueness, topped by enormous towers, was yet illuminated by those open squares of light that he had taken for stars, but which he saw now were brilliantly lit windows.

Their vivid rays shot through the reeds and sent broad bands across the meadow, the stationary wagon, and the slumbering oxen. But all this was nothing to the inner life they disclosed through lifted curtains and open blinds, which was the crowning revelation of this strange and wonderful spectacle. Elegantly dressed men and women moved through brilliantly lit and elaborately gilt saloons; in one a banquet seemed to be spread, served by white-jacketed servants; in another were men playing cards around marble-topped tables; in another the light flashed back again from the mirrors and glistening glasses and decanters of a gorgeous refreshment saloon; in smaller openings there was the shy disclosure of dainty white curtains and velvet lounges of more intimate apartments.

Martin Morse stood enthralled and mystified. It was as if some invisible Asmodeus had revealed to this simple frontiersman a world of which he had never dreamed. It was *the* world, — a world of which he knew nothing in his simple, rustic habits and profound Western isolation, — sweeping by him with the rush of an unknown planet. In another moment it was gone; a shower of sparks shot up from one of the towers and fell all around him, and then vanished, even as he remembered the set piece of "Fourth of July" fireworks had vanished in his own rural town when he was a boy. The darkness fell with it too. But such was his utter absorption and breathless preoccupation, that only a cold chill recalled him to himself, and he found he was standing mid-leg deep in the surge cast over the low banks by this passage of the first steamboat he had ever seen!

He waited for it the next night, when it appeared a little later from the opposite direction on its return trip. He watched it the next night and the next. Hereafter he never missed it, coming or going — whatever the hard and weary preoccupations of his new and lonely life. He felt he could not have slept without seeing it go by. Oddly enough, his interest and desire did not go further. Even had he the time and money to spend in a passage on the boat, and thus actively realize the great world of which he had only these rare glimpses, a certain proud, rustic shyness kept him from it. It was not *his* world; he could not affront the snubs that his ignorance and inexperience would have provoked, and he was dimly conscious, as so many of us are in our ignorance, that in mingling with it he would simply lose the easy privileges of alien criticism. For there was much that he did not understand, and some things that grated upon his lonely independence.

One night, a lighter one than those previous, he lingered a little longer in the moonlight to watch the phosphorescent wake of the retreating boat. Suddenly it struck him that there was a certain irregular splashing in the water, quite different from the regular, diagonally crossing surges that the boat swept upon the bank. Looking at it more intently, he saw a black object turning in the water like a porpoise, and then the unmistakable uplifting of a black arm in an unskillful swimmer's overhand stroke. It was a struggling man. But it was quickly evident that the current was too strong and the turbulence of the shallow water too great for his efforts. Without a moment's hesitation, clad as he was in only his shirt and trousers, Morse strode into the reeds, and the next moment, with a call of warning, was swimming towards the now wildly struggling figure. But, from some unknown reason, as Morse approached him nearer the man uttered some incoherent protest and desperately turned away, throwing off Morse's extended arm.

Attributing this only to the vague convulsions of a drowning man, Morse, a skilled swimmer, managed to clutch his shoulder, and propelled him at arm's length, still struggling, apparently with as much reluctance as incapacity, towards the bank. As their feet touched the reeds and slimy bottom the man's resistance ceased, and he lapsed quite listlessly in Morse's arms. Half lifting, half dragging his burden, he succeeded at last in gaining the strip of meadow, and deposited the unconscious man beneath the willow-tree. Then he ran to his wagon for whiskey.

But, to his surprise, on his return the man was already sitting up and wringing the water from his clothes. He then saw for the first time, by the clear moonlight, that the stranger was elegantly dressed and of striking appearance, and was clearly a part of that bright and fascinating world which Morse had been contemplating in his solitude. He eagerly took the proffered tin cup and drank the whiskey. Then he rose to his feet, staggered a few steps forward, and glanced curiously around him at the still motionless wagon, the few felled trees and evidence of "clearing," and even at the rude cabin of logs and canvas just beginning to rise from the ground a few paces distant, and said, impatiently: —

"Where the devil am I?"

Morse hesitated. He was unable to name the locality of his dwelling-place. He answered briefly: —

"On the right bank of the Sacramento."

The stranger turned upon him a look of suspicion not unmingled with resentment.

"Oh!" he said, with ironical gravity, "and I suppose that this water you picked me out of was the Sacramento River. Thank you!"

Morse, with slow Western patience, explained that he had only settled there three weeks ago, and the place had no name.

"What's your nearest town, then?"

"Thar ain't any. Thar's a blacksmith's shop and grocery at the cross-roads, twenty miles further on, but it's got no name as I've heard on."

The stranger's look of suspicion passed.

"Well," he said, in an imperative fashion, which, however, seemed as much the result of habit as the occasion, "I want a horse, and mighty quick, too."

"Hain't got any."

"No horse? How did you get to this place?"

Morse pointed to the slumbering oxen.

The stranger again stared curiously at him. After a pause he said, with a half-pitying, half-humorous smile: —

"Pike — are n't you?"

Whether Morse did or did not know that this current California slang for a denizen of the bucolic West implied a certain contempt, he replied simply: —

"I'm from Pike County, Mizzouri."

"Well," said the stranger, resuming his impatient manner "you must beg or steal a horse from your neighbors."

"Thar ain't any neighbor nearer than fifteen miles."

"Then send fifteen miles! Stop!" He opened his still clinging shirt and drew out a belt pouch, which he threw to Morse. "There! there's two hundred and fifty dollars in that. Now, I want a horse. Sabe?"

"Thar ain't any one to send," said Morse quietly.

"Do you mean to say you are all alone here?"

"Yes."

"And you fished me out — all by yourself?"

"Yes."

The stranger again examined him curiously. Then he suddenly stretched out his hand and grasped his companion's.

"All right; if you can't send, I reckon I can manage to walk over there to-morrow."

"I was goin' on to say," said Morse simply, "that if you'll lie by to-night, I'll start over sun-up, after puttin' out the cattle, and fetch you back a horse afore noon."

"That's enough." He, however, remained looking curiously at Morse. "Did you never hear," he said, with a singular smile, "that it was about the meanest kind of luck that could happen to you to save a drowning man?"

"No," said Morse simply. "I reckon it orter be the meanest if you *did n't.*"

"That depends upon the man you save," said the stranger, with the same ambiguous smile, "and whether the *saving* him is only putting things off. Look here," he added, with an abrupt return to his imperative style, "can't you give me some dry clothes?"

Morse brought him a pair of overalls and a "hickory shirt," well worn, but smelling strongly of a recent wash with coarse soap. The stranger put them on while his companion busied himself in collecting a pile of sticks and dry leaves.

"What 's that for?" said the stranger suddenly.

"A fire to dry your clothes."

The stranger calmly kicked the pile aside.

"Not any fire to-night if I know it," he said brusquely. Before Morse could resent his quickly changing moods he continued, in another tone, dropping to an easy reclining position beneath the tree, "Now, tell me all about yourself, and what you are doing here."

Thus commanded, Morse patiently repeated his story from the time he had left his backwoods cabin to his selection of the river-bank for a "location." He pointed out the rich quality of this alluvial bottom and its adaptability for the raising of stock, which he hoped soon to acquire. The stranger smiled grimly, raised himself to a sitting position, and, taking a penknife from his damp clothes, began to clean his nails in the bright moonlight — an occupation which made the simple Morse wander vaguely in his narration.

"And you don't know that this hole will give you chills and fever till you 'll shake yourself out of your boots?"

Morse had lived before in aguish districts, and had no fear.

"And you never heard that some night the whole river will rise up and walk over you and your cabin and your stock ?"

"No. For I reckon to move my shanty farther back."

The man shut up his penknife with a click, and rose.

"If you 've got to get up at sunrise, we 'd better be turning in. I suppose you can give me a pair of blankets ?"

Morse pointed to the wagon.

"Thar 's a shakedown in the wagon bed ; you kin lie there."

Nevertheless he hesitated, and, with the inconsequence and abruptness of a shy man, continued the previous conversation.

"I should n't like to move far away, for them steamboats is pow'ful kempany o' nights. I never seed one afore I kem here," and then, with the inconsistency of a reserved man, and without a word of further preliminary, he launched into a confidential disclosure of his late experiences. The stranger listened with a singular interest and a quietly searching eye.

"Then you were watching the boat very closely just now when you saw me. What else did you see ? Anything before that — before you saw me in the water ?"

"No — the boat had got well off before I saw you at all."

"Ah," said the stranger. "Well, I 'm going to turn in."

He walked to the wagon, mounted it, and by the time that Morse had reached it with his wet clothes he was already wrapped in the blankets. A moment later he seemed to be in a profound slumber.

It was only then, when his guest was lying helplessly at his mercy, that he began to realize his strange experiences. The domination of this man had been so complete that Morse, although by nature independent and self-reliant, had not permitted himself to question his right or to resent his rudeness. He had accepted his guest's careless or premeditated silence regarding the particulars of his accident as a matter of course, and had never dreamed of questioning him. That it was a natural accident of that great world so apart from his own experiences he did not doubt, and thought no more about it. The advent of the man himself was greater to him than the causes which brought him there. He was as yet quite unconscious of the complete fascination this mysterious stranger held over him, but he found himself shyly pleased with even the slight interest he had displayed in his affairs, and his hand felt yet warm and tingling from his sudden soft but expressive grasp, as if it had been a woman's. There is a simple intuition of friendship in some lonely, self-abstracted natures that is nearly akin to love at first sight. Even the audacities and insolence of this stranger affected Morse as he might have been touched and captivated by the coquetries or imperiousness of some bucolic virgin. And this reserved and shy frontiersman found himself that night sleepless, and hovering with an abashed timidity and consciousness around the wagon that sheltered his guest, as if he had been a very Corydon watching the moonlit couch of some slumbering Amaryllis.

He was off by daylight — after having placed a rude breakfast by the side of the still sleeping guest — and before midday he had returned with a horse. When he handed the stranger his pouch, less the amount he had paid for the horse, the man said curtly, —

"What's that for?"

"Your change. I paid only fifty dollars for the horse."

The stranger regarded him with his peculiar smile. Then, replacing the pouch in his belt, he shook Morse's hand again and mounted the horse.

"So your name's Martin Morse! Well — good-by, Morsey!"

Morse hesitated. A blush rose to his dark cheek.

"You did n't tell me *your* name," he said. "In case" —

"In case I 'm *wanted?* Well, you can call me Captain Jack."

He smiled, and, nodding his head, put spurs to his mustang and cantered away.

Morse did not do much work that day, falling into abstracted moods and living over his experiences of the previous night, until he fancied he could almost see his strange guest again. The narrow strip of meadow was haunted by him. There was the tree under which he had first placed him, and that was where he had seen him sitting up in his dripping but well-fitting clothes. In the rough garments he had worn and returned lingered a new scent of some delicate soap, overpowering the strong alkali flavor of his own. He was early by the riverside, having a vague hope, he knew not why, that he should again see him and recognize him among the passengers. He was wading out among the reeds, in the faint light of the rising moon, recalling the exact spot where he had first seen the stranger, when he was suddenly startled by the rolling over in the water of some black object that had caught against the bank, but had been dislodged by his movements. To his horror it bore a faint resemblance to his first vision of the preceding night. But a second glance at the helplessly floating hair and bloated outline showed him that it was a *dead* man, and of a type and build far different from his former companion. There was a bruise upon his matted forehead and an enormous wound in his throat already washed bloodless, white, and waxen. An inexplicable fear came upon him, not at the sight of the corpse, for he had been in Indian massacres and had rescued bodies mutilated beyond recognition; but from some moral dread that, strangely enough, quickened and deepened with the far-off pant of the advancing steamboat. Scarcely knowing why, he dragged the body hurriedly ashore, concealing it in the reeds, as if he were disposing of the evidence of his own crime. Then, to his preposterous terror, he noticed that the panting of the steamboat and the beat of its paddles were "slowing" as the vague bulk came in sight, until a huge wave from the suddenly arrested wheels sent a surge like an enormous heart-beat pulsating through the sedge that half submerged him. The flashing of three or four lanterns on deck and the motionless line of lights abreast of him dazzled his eyes, but he knew that the low fringe of willows hid his house and wagon completely from view. A vague murmur of voices from the deck was suddenly overridden by a sharp order, and to his relief the slowly revolving wheels again sent a pulsation through the water, and the great fabric moved solemnly away. A sense of relief came over him, he knew not why, and he was conscious that for the first time he had not cared to look at the boat.

When the moon arose he again examined the body, and took from its clothing a few articles of identification and some papers of formality and precision, which he vaguely conjectured to be some law papers from their resemblance to the phrasing of sheriffs' and electors' notices which he had seen in the papers. He then buried the corpse in a shallow trench, which he dug by the light of the moon. He had no question of responsibility; his pioneer training had not included coroners' inquests in its experience; in giving the body a speedy and secure burial from predatory animals he did what one frontiersman would do for another — what he hoped might be done for *him*. If his previous unaccountable feelings returned occasionally, it was not from that; but rather from some uneasiness in regard to his late guest's possible feelings, and a regret that he had not been here at the finding of the body. That it would in some way have explained his own accident he did not doubt.

The boat did not "slow up" the next night, but passed as usual; yet three or four days elapsed before he could look forward to its coming with his old extravagant and half-exalted curiosity, which was his nearest approach to imagination. He was then able to examine it more closely, for the appearance of the stranger, whom he now began to call "his friend" in his verbal communings with himself, but whom he did not seem destined to again discover; until one day, to his astonishment, a couple of fine horses were brought to his clearing by a stock-drover. They had been "ordered" to be left there. In vain Morse expostulated and questioned.

"Your name's Martin Morse, ain't it?" said the drover, with business brusqueness; "and I reckon there ain't no other man o' that name around here?"

"No," said Morse.

"Well, then they're *yours*."

"But who sent them?" insisted Morse. "What was his name, and where does he live?"

"I did n't know ez I was called upon to give the pedigree o' buyers," said the drover dryly; "but the horses is 'Morgan,' you can bet your life." He grinned as he rode away.

That Captain Jack sent them, and that it was a natural prelude to his again visiting him, Morse did not doubt, and for a few days he lived in that dream. But Captain Jack did not come. The animals were of great service to him in "rounding up" the stock he now easily took in for pasturage, and saved him the necessity of having a partner or a hired man. The idea that this superior gentleman in fine clothes might ever appear to him in the former capacity had even flitted through his brain, but he had rejected it with a sigh. But the thought that, with luck and industry, he himself might, in course of time, approximate to Captain Jack's evident station, *did* occur to him, and was an incentive to energy. Yet it was quite distinct from the ordinary workingman's ambition of wealth and state. It was only that it might make him more worthy of his friend. The great world was still as it had appeared to him in the passing boat — a thing to wonder at — to be above — and to criticise.

For all that, he prospered in his occupation. But one day he woke with listless limbs and feet that scarcely carried him through his daily labors. At night his listlessness changed to active pain and a feverishness that seemed to impel him towards the fateful river, as if his one aim in life was to drink up its waters and bathe in its yellow stream. But whenever he seemed to attempt it, strange dreams assailed him of dead bodies arising with swollen and distorted lips to touch his own as he strove to drink, or of his mysterious guest battling with him in its current, and driving him ashore. Again, when he essayed to bathe his parched and crackling limbs in its flood, he would be confronted with the dazzling lights of the motionless steamboat and the glare of stony eyes — until he fled in aimless terror. How long this lasted he knew not, until one morning he awoke in his new cabin with a strange man sitting by his bed and a negress in the doorway.

"You 've had a sharp attack of 'tule fever,'" said the stranger, dropping Morse's listless wrist and answering his questioning eyes, "but you 're all right now, and will pull through."

"Who are you?" stammered Morse feebly.

"Dr. Duchesne, of Sacramento."

"How did you come here?"

"I was ordered to come to you and bring a nurse, as you were alone. There she is." He pointed to the smiling negress.

"*Who* ordered you?"

The doctor smiled with professional tolerance. "One of your friends, of course."

"But what was his name?"

"Really, I don't remember. But don't distress yourself. He has settled for everything right royally. You have only to get strong now. My duty is ended, and I can safely leave you with the nurse. Only when you are strong again, I say — and *he* says — keep back farther from the river."

And that was all he knew. For even the nurse who attended him through the first days of his brief convalescence would tell him nothing more. He quickly got rid of her and resumed his work, for a new and strange phase of his simple, childish affection for his benefactor, partly superinduced by his illness, was affecting him. He was beginning to feel the pain of an unequal friendship; he was dimly conscious that his mysterious guest was only coldly returning his hospitality and benefits, while holding aloof from any association with him, and indicating the immeasurable distance that separated their future intercourse. He had withheld any kind message or sympathetic greeting; he had kept back even his *name*. The shy, proud, ignorant heart of the frontiersman swelled beneath the fancied slight, which left him helpless alike of reproach or resentment. He could not return the horses, although in a fit of childish indignation he had resolved not to use them; he could not reimburse him for the doctor's bill although he had sent away the nurse.

He took a foolish satisfaction in not moving back from the river, with a faint hope that his ignoring of Captain Jack's advice might mysteriously be conveyed to him. He even thought of selling out his location and abandoning it, that he might escape the cold surveillance of his heartless friend. All this was undoubtedly childish, but there is an irrepressible simplicity of youth in all deep feeling, and the worldly inexperience of the frontiersman left him as innocent as a child. In this phase of his unrequited affection he even went so far as to seek some news of Captain Jack at Sacramento, and, following out his foolish quest, to even take the steamboat from thence to Stockton.

What happened to him then was perhaps the common experience of such natures. Once upon the boat the illusion of the great world it contained for him utterly vanished. He found it noisy, formal, insincere, and — had he ever understood or used the word in his limited vocabulary — *vulgar*. Rather, perhaps, it seemed to him that the prevailing sentiment and action of those who frequented it — and for whom it was built — were of a lower grade than his own. And, strangely enough, this gave him none of his former sense of critical superiority, but only of his own utter and complete isolation. He wandered in his rough frontiersman's clothes from deck to cabin, from airy galleries to long saloons, alone, unchallenged, unrecognized, as if he were again haunting it only in spirit, as he had so often done in his dreams.

His presence on the fringe of some voluble crowd caused no interruption; to him their speech was almost foreign in its allusions to things he did not understand, or, worse, seemed inconsistent with their eagerness and excitement. How different from all this were his old recollections of slowly oncoming teams, uplifted above the level horizon of the plains in his former wanderings; the few sauntering figures that met him as man to man and exchanged the chronicle of the road; the record of Indian tracks; the finding of a spring; the discovery of pasturage, with the lazy, restful hospitality of the night! And how fierce here this continual struggle for dominance and existence, even in this lull of passage. For above all and through all he was conscious of the feverish haste of speed and exertion.

The boat trembled, vibrated, and shook with every stroke of the ponderous piston. The laughter of the crowd, the exchange of gossip and news, the banquet at the long table, the newspapers and books in the reading-room, even the luxurious couches in the staterooms, were all dominated, thrilled, and pulsating with the perpetual throb of the demon of hurry and unrest. And when at last a horrible fascination dragged him into the engine-room, and he saw the cruel, relentless machinery at work, he seemed to recognize and understand some intelligent but pitiless Moloch, who was dragging this feverish world at its heels.

Later he was seated in a corner of the hurricane deck, whence he could view the monotonous banks of the river; yet, perhaps by certain signs unobservable to others, he knew he was approaching his own locality. He knew that his cabin and clearing would be undiscernible behind the fringe of willows on the bank, but he already distinguished the points where a few cottonwoods struggled into a promontory of lighter foliage beyond them. Here voices fell upon his ear, and he was suddenly aware that two men had lazily crossed over from the other side of the boat, and were standing before him looking upon the bank.

"It was about here, I reckon," said one listlessly, as if continuing a previous lagging conversation, "that it must have happened. For it was after we were making for the bend we 've just passed that the deputy, goin' to the stateroom below us, found the door locked and the window open. But both men — Jack Despard and Seth Hall, the sheriff — were n't to be found. Not a trace of 'em. The boat was searched, but all for nothing. The idea is that the sheriff, arter getting his prisoner comf'ble in the stateroom, took off Jack's handcuffs and locked the door; that Jack, who was mighty desp'rate, bolted through the window into the river, and the sheriff, who was no slouch, arter him. Others allow — for the chairs and things was all tossed about in the state room — that the two men clinched *thar*, and Jack choked Hall and chucked him out, and then slipped cl'ar into the water himself, for the stateroom window was just ahead of the paddle-box, and the cap'n allows that no man or men could fall afore the paddles and live. Anyhow, that was all they ever knew of it."

"And there was n't no trace of them found?" said the second man, after a long pause.

"No. Cap'n says them paddles would hev' just snatched 'em and slung 'em round and round and buried 'em 'way down in the ooze of the river-bed, with all the silt of the current atop of 'em, and they might n't come up for ages; or else the wheels might have waltzed 'em 'way up to Sacramento until there was n't enough left of 'em to float, and dropped 'em when the boat stopped."

"It was a mighty fool risk for a man like Despard to take," resumed the second speaker as he turned away with a slight yawn.

"Bet your life! but he was desp'rate, and the sheriff had got him sure! And they *do* say that he was superstitious, like all them gamblers, and allowed that a man who was fixed to die by a rope or a pistol was n't to be washed out of life by water."

The two figures drifted lazily away, but Morse sat rigid and motionless. Yet, strange to say, only one idea came to him clearly out of this awful revelation — the thought that his friend was still true to him — and that his strange absence and mysterious silence were fully accounted for and explained. And with it came the more thrilling fancy that this man was alive now to *him* alone.

He was the sole custodian of his secret. The morality of the question, while it profoundly disturbed him, was rather in reference to its effect upon the chances of Captain Jack and the power it gave his enemies than his own conscience. He would rather that his friend should have proven the proscribed outlaw who retained an unselfish interest in him than the superior gentleman who was coldly wiping out his gratitude. He thought he understood now the reason of his visitor's strange and varying moods — even his bitter superstitious warning in regard to the probable curse entailed upon one who should save a drowning man. Of this he recked little; enough that he fancied that Captain Jack's concern in his illness was heightened by that fear, and this assurance of his protecting friendship thrilled him with pleasure.

There was no reason now why he should not at once go back to his farm, where, at least, Captain Jack would always find him; and he did so, returning on the same boat. He was now fully recovered from his illness, and calmer in mind; he redoubled his labors to put himself in a position to help the mysterious fugitive when the time should come. The remote farm should always be a haven of refuge for him, and in this hope he forbore to take any outside help, remaining solitary and alone, that Captain Jack's retreat should be inviolate. And so the long, dry season passed, the hay was gathered, the pasturing herds sent home, and the first rains dimpling like shot the broadening surface of the river were all that broke his unending solitude. In this enforced attitude of waiting and expectancy he was exalted and strengthened by a new idea. He was not a religious man, but, dimly remembering the exhortations of some camp-meeting of his boyhood, he conceived the idea that he might have been selected to work out the regeneration of Captain Jack. What might not come of this meeting and communing together in this lonely spot? That anything was due to the memory of the murdered sheriff, whose bones were rotting in the trench that he daily but unconcernedly passed, did not occur to him. Perhaps his mind was not large enough for the double consideration. Friendship and love — and, for the matter of that, religion — are eminently one-ideaed.

But one night he awakened with a start. His hand, which was hanging out of his bunk, was dabbling idly in water. He had barely time to spring to his middle in what seemed to be a slowly filling tank before the door fell out as from that inward pressure, and his whole shanty collapsed like a pack of cards. But it fell outwards, the roof sliding from over his head like a withdrawn canopy; and he was swept from his feet against it, and thence out into what might have been another world! For the rain had ceased, and the full moon revealed only one vast, illimitable expanse of water! It was not an overflow, but the whole rushing river magnified and repeated a thousand times, which, even as he gasped for breath and clung to the roof, was bearing him away he knew not whither. But it was bearing him away upon its centre, for as he cast one swift glance toward his meadows he saw they were covered by the same sweeping torrent, dotted with his sailing hayricks and reaching to the wooded foothills. It was the great flood of '54. In its awe-inspiring completeness it might have seemed to him the primeval Deluge.

As his frail raft swept under a cottonwood he caught at one of the overhanging limbs, and, working his way desperately along the bough, at last reached a secure position in the fork of the tree. Here he was for the moment safe. But the devastation viewed from this height was only the more appalling. Every sign of his clearing, all evidence of his past year's industry, had disappeared. He was now conscious for the first time of the lowing of the few cattle he had kept, as, huddled together on a slight eminence, they one by one slipped over struggling into the flood. The shining bodies of his dead horses rolled by him as he gazed. The lower-lying limbs of the sycamore near him were bending with the burden of the lighter articles from his overturned wagon and cabin which they had caught and retained, and a rake was securely lodged in a bough. The habitual solitude of his locality was now strangely invaded by drifting sheds, agricultural implements, and fence rails from unknown and remote neighbors, and he could faintly hear the far-off calling of some unhappy farmer adrift upon a spar of his wrecked and shattered house. When day broke he was cold and hungry.

Hours passed in hopeless monotony, with no slackening or diminution of the waters. Even the drifts became less, and a vacant sea at last spread before him on which nothing moved. An awful silence impressed him. In the afternoon rain again began to fall on this gray, nebulous expanse, until the whole world seemed made of aqueous vapor. He had but one idea now — the coming of the evening boat, and he would reserve his strength to swim to it. He did not know until later that it could no longer follow the old channel of the river, and passed far beyond his sight and hearing. With his disappointment and exposure that night came a return of his old fever. His limbs were alternately racked with pain or benumbed and lifeless. He could scarcely retain his position — at times he scarcely cared to — and speculated upon ending his sufferings by a quick plunge downwards. In other moments of lucid misery he was conscious of having wandered in his mind; of having seen the dead face of the murdered sheriff, washed out of his shallow grave by the flood, staring at him from the water; to this was added the hallucination of noises. He heard voices, his own name called by a voice he knew — Captain Jack's!

Suddenly he started, but in that fatal movement lost his balance and plunged downwards. But before the water closed above his head he had had a cruel glimpse of help near him; of a flashing light — of the black hull of a tug not many yards away — of moving figures — the sensation of a sudden plunge following his own, the grip of a strong hand upon his collar, and — unconsciousness!

When he came to he was being lifted in a boat from the tug and rowed through the deserted streets of a large city, until he was taken in through the second-story window of a half-submerged hotel, and cared for. But all his questions yielded only the information that the tug — a privately procured one, not belonging to the Public Relief Association — had been dispatched for him with special directions, by a man who acted as one of the crew, and who was the one who had plunged in for him at the last moment. The man had left the boat at Stockton. There was nothing more? Yes! — he had left a letter. Morse seized it feverishly. It contained only a few lines: —

We are quits now. You are all right. I have saved *you* from drowning, and shifted the curse to my own shoulders. Good-by. CAPTAIN JACK.

The astounded man attempted to rise — to utter an exclamation — but fell back, unconscious.

Weeks passed before he was able to leave his bed, and then only as an impoverished and physically shattered man. He had no means to re-stock the farm left bare by the subsiding water. A kindly train-packer offered him a situation as muleteer in a pack-train going to the mountains, for he knew tracks and passes, and could ride. The mountains gave him back a little of the vigor he had lost in the river valley, but none of its dreams and ambitions. One day, while tracking a lost mule, he stopped to slake his thirst in a water-hole — all that the summer had left of a lonely mountain torrent. Enlarging the hole to give drink to his beast also, he was obliged to dislodge and throw out with the red soil some bits of honeycomb rock, which were so queer-looking and so heavy as to attract his attention. Two of the largest he took back to camp with him. They were gold! From the locality he took out a fortune. Nobody wondered. To the Californian's superstition it was perfectly natural. It was "nigger luck" — the luck of the stupid, the ignorant, the inexperienced, the non-seeker — the irony of the gods!

But the simple, bucolic nature that had sustained itself against temptation with patient industry and lonely self-concentration succumbed to rapidly acquired wealth. So it chanced that one day, with a crowd of excitement-loving spendthrifts and companions, he found himself on the outskirts of a lawless mountain town. An eager, frantic crowd had already assembled there — a desperado was to be lynched! Pushing his way through the crowd for a nearer view of the exciting spectacle, the changed and reckless Morse was stopped by armed men only at the foot of a cart, which upheld a quiet, determined man, who, with a rope around his neck, was scornfully surveying the mob, that held the other end of the rope drawn across the limb of a tree above him. The eyes of the doomed man caught those of Morse — his expression changed — a kindly smile lit his face — he bowed his proud head for the first time, with an easy gesture of farewell.

And then, with a cry, Morse threw himself upon the nearest armed guard, and a fierce struggle began. He had overpowered one adversary and seized another in his hopeless fight toward the cart when the half-astonished crowd felt that something must be done. It was done with a sharp report, the upward curl of smoke, and the falling back of the guard as Morse staggered forward *free* — with a bullet in his heart. Yet even then he did not fall until he reached the cart, when he lapsed forward, dead, with his arms outstretched and his head at the doomed man's feet.

There was something so supreme and all-powerful in this hopeless act of devotion that the heart of the multitude thrilled and then recoiled aghast at its work, and a single word or gesture from the doomed man himself would have set him free. But they say — and it is credibly recorded — that as Captain Jack Despard looked down upon the hopeless sacrifice at his feet his eyes blazed, and he flung upon the crowd a curse so awful and sweeping that, hardened as they were, their blood ran cold, and then leaped furiously to their cheeks.

"And now," he said, coolly tightening the rope around his neck with a jerk of his head, "go on, and be d—d to you! I'm ready."

They did not hesitate this time. And Martin Morse and Captain Jack Despard were buried in the same grave.

BARKER'S LUCK

A BIRD twittered! The morning sun shining through the open window was apparently more potent than the cool mountain air, which had only caused the sleeper to curl a little more tightly in his blankets. Barker's eyes opened instantly upon the light and the bird on the window ledge. Like all healthy young animals he would have tried to sleep again, but with his momentary consciousness came the recollection that it was *his* turn to cook the breakfast that morning, and he regretfully rolled out of his bunk to the floor. Without stopping to dress, he opened the door and stepped outside, secure in the knowledge that he was overlooked only by the Sierras, and plunged his head and shoulders in the bucket of cold water that stood by the door. Then he began to clothe himself, partly in the cabin and partly in the open air, with a lapse between the putting on of his trousers and coat which he employed in bringing in wood. Raking together the few embers on the adobe hearth, not without a prudent regard to the rattlesnake which had once been detected in haunting the warm ashes, he began to prepare breakfast. By this time the other sleepers, his partners Stacy and Demorest, young men of about his own age, were awake, alert, and lazily critical of his progress.

"I don't care about my quail on toast being underdone for breakfast," said Stacy, with a yawn; "and you need n't serve with red wine. I 'm not feeling very peckish this morning."

"And I reckon you can knock off the fried oysters after the Spanish mackerel for *me*," said Demorest gravely. "The fact is, that last bottle of Veuve Clicquot we had for supper was n't as dry as I am this morning."

Accustomed to these regular Barmecide suggestions, Barker made no direct reply. Presently, looking up from the fire, he said, "There 's no more saleratus, so you must n't blame me if the biscuit is extra heavy. I told you we had none when you went to the grocery yesterday."

"And I told you we had n't a red cent to buy any with," said Stacy, who was also treasurer. "Put these two negatives together and you make the affirmative — saleratus. Mix freely and bake in a hot oven."

Nevertheless, after a toilet as primitive as Barker's they sat down to what he had prepared, with the keen appetite begotten of the mountain air and the regretful fastidiousness born of the recollection of better things. Jerked beef, frizzled with salt pork in a frying-pan, boiled potatoes, biscuit, and coffee composed the repast. The biscuits, however, proving remarkably heavy after the first mouthful, were used as missiles, thrown through the open door at an empty bottle, which had previously served as a mark for revolver practice, and a few moments later pipes were lit to counteract the effects of the meal and take the taste out of their mouths. Suddenly they heard the sound of horses' hoofs, saw the quick passage of a rider in the open space before the cabin, and felt the smart impact upon the table of some small object thrown by him. It was the regular morning delivery of the county newspaper!

"He 's getting to be a mighty sure shot," said Demorest approvingly, looking at his upset can of coffee as he picked up the paper, rolled into a cylindrical wad as tightly as a cartridge, and began to straighten it out. This was no easy matter, as the sheet had evidently been rolled while yet damp from the press; but Demorest eventually opened it and ensconced himself behind it.

"Nary news?" asked Stacy.

"No. There never is any," said Demorest scornfully. "We ought to stop the paper."

"You mean the paper-man ought to. *We* don't pay him," said Barker gently.

"Well, that's the same thing, smarty. No news, no pay. Hallo!" he continued, his eyes suddenly riveted on the paper. Then, after the fashion of ordinary humanity, he stopped short and read the interesting item to himself. When he had finished he brought his fist and the paper, together, violently down upon the table. "Now look at this! Talk of luck, will you? Just think of it. Here are *we* — hard-working men with lots of sabe, too — grubbin' away on this hillside like niggers, glad to get enough at the end of the day to pay for our soggy biscuits and horse-bean coffee, and just look what falls into the lap of some lazy sneakin' greenhorn who never did a stroke of work in his life! Here are *we*, with no foolishness, no airs nor graces, and yet men who would do credit to twice that amount of luck — and seem born to it, too — and we're set aside for some long, lank, penwiping scrub who just knows enough to sit down on his office stool and hold on to a bit of paper."

"What's up now?" asked Stacy, with the carelessness begotten of familiarity with his partner's extravagance.

"Listen," said Demorest, reading. "Another unprecedented rise has taken place in the shares of the Yellow Hammer First Extension Mine since the sinking of the new shaft. It was quoted yesterday at ten thousand dollars a foot. When it is remembered that scarcely two years ago the original shares, issued at fifty dollars per share, had dropped to only fifty cents a share, it will be seen that those who were able to hold on have got a good thing."

"What mine did you say?" asked Barker, looking up meditatively from the dishes he was already washing.

"The Yellow Hammer First Extension," returned Demorest shortly.

"I used to have some shares in that, and I think I have them still," said Barker musingly.

"Yes," said Demorest promptly; "the paper speaks of it here. 'We understand,'" he continued, reading aloud, 'that our eminent fellow citizen, George Barker, otherwise known as "Get-Left Barker" and "Chucklehead," is one of these fortunate individuals.'"

"No," said Barker, with a slight flush of innocent pleasure, "it can't say that. How could it know?"

Stacy laughed, but Demorest coolly continued: "You did n't hear all. Listen! 'We say *was* one of them; but having already sold his apparently useless certificates to our popular druggist, Jones, for corn-plasters, at a reduced rate, he is unable to realize.'"

"You may laugh, boys," said Barker, with simple seriousness; "but I really believe I have got 'em yet. Just wait. I 'll see!" He rose and began to drag out a well-worn valise from under his bunk. "You see," he continued, "they were given to me by an old chap in return"—

"For saving his life by delaying the Stockton boat that afterwards blew up," returned Demorest briefly. "We know it all! His hair was white, and his hand trembled slightly as he laid these shares in yours, saying,—and you never forgot the words,—'Take 'em, young man—and'"—

"For lending him two thousand dollars then," continued Barker, with a simple ignoring of the interruption, as he quietly brought out the valise.

"*Two thousand dollars!*" repeated Stacy. "When did *you* have two thousand dollars?"

"When I first left Sacramento — three years ago," said Barker, unstrapping the valise.

"How long did you have it?" said Demorest incredulously.

"At least two days, I think," returned Barker quietly. "Then I met that man. He was hard up, and I lent him my pile and took those shares. He died afterwards."

"Of course he did," said Demorest severely. "They always do. Nothing kills a man more quickly than an action of that kind."

Nevertheless the two partners regarded Barker rummaging among some loose clothes and papers with a kind of paternal toleration.

"If you can't find them, bring out your government bonds," suggested Stacy. But the next moment, flushed and triumphant, Barker rose from his knees, and came towards them carrying some papers in his hands.

Demorest seized them from him, opened them, spread them on the table, examined hurriedly the date, signatures, and transfers, glanced again quickly at the newspaper paragraph, looked wildly at Stacy and then at Barker, and gasped, —

"By the living hookey! it is *so!*"

'B'gosh! he *has* got 'em!" echoed Stacy.

"Twenty shares," continued Demorest breathlessly, "at ten thousand dollars a share — even if it's only a foot — is two hundred thousand dollars! Jerusalem!"

"Tell me, fair sir," said Stacy, with sparkling eyes, "hast still left in yonder casket any rare jewels, rubies, sarcenet, or links of fine gold? Peradventure a pearl or two may have been overlooked!"

"No — that's all," returned Barker simply.

"You hear him! Rothschild says 'that's all.' Prince Esterhazy says he has n't another red cent — only two hundred thousand dollars."

"What ought I to do, boys?" asked Barker, timidly glancing from one to the other.

Yet he remembered with delight all that day, and for many a year afterwards, that he only saw in their faces unselfish joy and affection at that supreme moment.

"Do?" said Demorest promptly. "Stand on your head and yell! No! stop! Come here!" He seized both Barker and Stacy by the hand, and ran out into the open air. Here they danced violently with clasped hands around a small buckeye, in perfect silence, and then returned to the cabin, grave but perspiring.

"Of course," said Barker, wiping his forehead, "we'll just get some money on these certificates and buy up that next claim which belongs to old Carter — where you know we thought we saw the indication."

"We'll do nothing of the kind," said Demorest decidedly. "*We* ain't in it. That money is yours, old chap — every cent of it — property acquired before marriage, you know; and the only thing we'll do is to be d—d before we'll see you drop a dime of into this God-forsaken hole. No!"

"But we're partners," gasped Barker.

"Not in *this!* The utmost we can do for you, opulent sir, — though it ill becomes us horny-handed sons of toil to rub shoulders with Dives, — is perchance to dine with you, to take a pasty and a glass of Malvoisie, at some restaurant in Sacramento — when you've got things fixed, in honor of your return to affluence. But more would ill become us!"

"But what are *you* going to do?" said Barker, with a half-hysteric, half-frightened smile.

"We have not yet looked through our luggage," said Demorest with invincible gravity, "and there's a secret recess — a double fond — to my portmanteau, known only to a trusty page, which has not been disturbed since I left my ancestral home in Faginia. There may be a few First Debentures of Erie or what not still there."

"I felt some strange, disk-like protuberances in my dress suit the other day, but belike they are but poker chips," said Stacy thoughtfully.

An uneasy feeling crept over Barker. The color which had left his fresh cheek returned to it quickly, and he turned his eyes away. Yet he had seen nothing in his companions' eyes but affection — with even a certain kind of tender commiseration that deepened his uneasiness.

"I suppose," he said desperately, after a pause, "I ought to go over to Boomville and make some inquiries."

"At the bank, old chap; at the bank!" said Demorest emphatically. "Take my advice and don't go *anywhere else.* Don't breathe a word of your luck to anybody. And don't, whatever you do, be tempted to sell just now; you don't know how high that stock 's going to jump yet."

"I thought," stammered Barker, "that you boys might like to go over with me."

"We can't afford to take another holiday on grub wages, and we 're only two to work to-day," said Demorest, with a slight increase of color and the faintest tremor in his voice. "And it won't do, old chap, for us to be seen bumming round with you on the heels of your good fortune. For everybody knows we 're poor, and sooner or later everybody 'll know you *were* rich even when you first came to us."

"Nonsense!" said Barker indignantly.

"Gospel, my boy!" said Demorest shortly.

"The frozen truth, old man!" said Stacy.

Barker took up his hat with some stiffness and moved towards the door. Here he stopped irresolutely, an irresolution that seemed to communicate itself to his partners. There was a moment's awkward silence. Then Demorest suddenly seized him by the shoulders with a grip that was half a caress, and walked him rapidly to the door.

"And now don't stand foolin' with us, Barker boy; but just trot off like a little man, and get your grip on that fortune; and when you've got your hooks in it hang on like grim death. You'll" — he hesitated for an instant only, possibly to find the laugh that should have accompanied his speech — "you're sure to find *us* here when you get back."

Hurt to the quick, but restraining his feelings, Barker clapped his hat on his head and walked quickly away. The two partners stood watching him in silence until his figure was lost in the underbrush. Then they spoke.

"Like him — was n't it?" said Demorest.

"Just him all over," said Stacy.

"Think of him having that stock stowed away all these years and never even bothering his dear old head about it!"

"And think of his wanting to put the whole thing into this rotten hillside with us!"

"And he'd have done it, by gosh! and never thought of it again. That's Barker."

"Dear old man!"

"Good old chap!"

"I've been wondering if one of us ought n't to have gone with him? He's just as likely to pour his money into the first lap that opens for it," said Stacy.

"The more reason why we should n't prevent him, or seem to prevent him," said Demorest almost fiercely. "There will be knaves and fools enough who will try and put the idea of our using him into his simple heart without that. No! Let him do as he likes with it — but let him be himself. I'd rather have him come back to us even after he's lost the money — his old self and empty-handed — than try to change the stuff God put into him and make him more like others."

The tone and manner were so different from Demorest's usual levity that Stacy was silent. After a pause he said: "Well! we shall miss him on the hillside — won't we?"

Demorest did not reply. Reaching out his hand abstractedly, he wrenched off a small slip from a sapling near him, and began slowly to pull the leaves off, one by one, until they were all gone. Then he switched it in the air, struck his boot-leg smartly with it, said roughly: "Come, let's get to work!" and strode away.

Meantime Barker on his way to Boomville was no less singular in his manner. He kept up his slightly affected attitude until he had lost sight of the cabin. But, being of a simple nature, his emotions were less complex. If he had not seen the undoubted look of affection in the eyes of his partners he would have imagined that they were jealous of his good fortune. Yet why had they refused his offer to share it with him? Why had they so strangely assumed that their partnership with him had closed? Why had they declined to go with him? Why had this money — of which he had thought so little, and for which he had cared so little — changed them towards him? It had not changed *him* — *he* was the same! He remembered how they had often talked and laughed over a prospective "strike" in mining and speculated what *they* would do together with the money! And now that "luck" had occurred to one of them individually, the effect was only to alienate them! He could not make it out. He was hurt, wounded, yet oddly enough he was conscious now of a certain power within him to hurt and wound in retribution. He was rich: he would let them see *he* could do without them. He was quite free now to think only of himself and Kitty.

For it must be recorded that, with all this young gentleman's simplicity and unselfishness, with all his loyal attitude to his partners, his *first* thought at the moment he grasped the fact of his wealth was of a young lady. It was Kitty Carter, the daughter of the hotelkeeper at Boomville, who owned the claim that the partners had mutually coveted. That a pretty girl's face should flash upon him with his conviction that he was now a rich man meant perhaps no disloyalty to his partners, whom he would still have helped. But it occurred to him now, in his half-hurt, half-vengeful state, that they had often joked him about Kitty, and perhaps further confidence with them was debarred. And it was only due to his dignity that he should now see Kitty at once.

This was easy enough, for, in the naïve simplicity of Boomville, and the economic arrangements of her father, she occasionally waited upon the hotel table. Half the town was always actively in love with her; the other half *had been*, and was silent, cynical, but hopeless in defeat. For Kitty was one of those singularly pretty girls occasionally met with in Southwestern frontier civilization whose distinct and original refinement of face and figure were so remarkable and original as to cast a doubt on the sagacity and prescience of one parent and the morality of the other, yet no doubt with equal injustice. But the fact remained that she was slight, graceful, and self-contained, and moved beside her stumpy, commonplace father, and her faded, commonplace mother, in the dining-room of the Boomville Hotel like some distinguished alien. The three partners, by virtue, perhaps, of their college education and refined manners, had been exceptionally noticed by Kitty. And for some occult reason — the more serious, perhaps, because it had no obvious or logical presumption to the world generally — Barker was particularly favored.

He quickened his pace, and as the flagstaff of the Boomville Hotel rose before him in the little hollow, he seriously debated whether he had not better go to the bank first, deposit his shares, and get a small advance on them to buy a new necktie or a "boiled shirt" in which to present himself to Miss Kitty; but, remembering that he had partly given his word to Demorest that he would keep his shares intact for the present, he abandoned this project, probably from the fact that his projected confidence with Kitty was already a violation of Demorest's injunctions of secrecy, and his conscience was sufficiently burdened with that breach of faith.

But when he reached the hotel, a strange trepidation overcame him. The dining-room was at its slack water, between the ebb of breakfast and before the flow of the preparation for the midday meal. He could not have his interview with Kitty in that dreary waste of reversed chairs and bare trestle-like tables, and she was possibly engaged in her household duties. But Miss Kitty had already seen him cross the road, and had lounged into the dining-room with an artfully simulated air of casually examining it. At the unexpected vision of his hopes, arrayed in the sweetest and freshest of rosebud-sprigged print, his heart faltered. Then, partly with the desperation of a timid man, and partly through the working of a half-formed resolution, he met her bright smile with a simple inquiry for her father. Miss Kitty bit her pretty lip, smiled slightly, and preceded him with great formality to the office. Opening the door, without raising her lashes to either her father or the visitor, she said, with a mischievous accenting of the professional manner, "Mr. Barker, to see you on business," and tripped sweetly away.

And this slight incident precipitated the crisis. For Barker instantly made up his mind that he must purchase the next claim for his partners of this man Carter, and that he would be obliged to confide to him the details of his good fortune, and, as a proof of his sincerity and his ability to pay for it, he did so bluntly. Carter was a shrewd business man, and the well-known simplicity of Barker was a proof of his truthfulness, to say nothing of the shares that were shown to him. His selling price for his claim had been two hundred dollars, but here was a rich customer who, from a mere foolish sentiment, would be no doubt willing to pay more. He hesitated with a bland but superior smile.

"Ah, that was my price at my last offer, Mr. Barker," he said suavely; "but, you see, things are going up since then."

The keenest duplicity is apt to fail before absolute simplicity. Barker, thoroughly believing him, and already a little frightened at his own presumption — not for the amount of the money involved, but from the possibility of his partners refusing his gift utterly — quickly took advantage of this *locus penitentiæ.*

"No matter, then," he said hurriedly; "perhaps I had better consult my partners first; in fact," he added, with a gratuitous truthfulness all his own, "I hardly know whether they will take it of me, so I think I 'll wait."

Carter was staggered; this would clearly not do! He recovered himself with an insinuating smile.

"You pulled me up too short, Mr. Barker; I 'm a business man, but hang it all! what 's that among friends? If you reckoned I *gave my word* at two hundred — why, I 'm there! Say no more about it — the claim 's yours. I 'll make you out a bill of sale at once."

"But," hesitated Barker, "you see I have n't got the money yet, and" —

"Money!" echoed Carter bluntly, "what 's that among friends? Gimme your note at thirty days — that 's good enough for *me.* An' we 'll settle the whole thing now, — nothing like finishing a job while you 're about it." And before the bewildered and doubtful visitor could protest, he had filled up a promissory note for Barker's signature and himself signed a bill of sale for the property. "And I reckon, Mr. Barker, you 'd like to take your partners by surprise about this little gift of yours," he added smilingly. "Well, my messenger is starting for the Gulch in five minutes; he's going by your cabin, and he can just drop this bill o' sale, as a kind o' settled fact, on 'em afore they can say anything, see! There 's nothing like actin' on the spot in these sort of things. And don't you hurry 'bout them either! You see, you sorter owe us a friendly call — havin' always dropped inter the hotel only as a customer — so ye 'll stop here over luncheon, and I reckon, as the old woman is busy, why, Kitty will try to make the time pass till then by playin' for you on her new pianner."

Delighted, yet bewildered by the unexpected invitation and opportunity, Barker mechanically signed the promissory note, and as mechanically addressed the envelope of the bill of sale to Demorest, which Carter gave to the messenger. Then he followed his host across the hall to the apartment known as "Miss Kitty's parlor." He had often heard of it as a sanctum impervious to the ordinary guest. Whatever functions the young girl assumed at the hotel and among her father's boarders, it was vaguely understood that she dropped them on crossing that sacred threshold, and became "*Miss* Carter." The county judge had been entertained there, and the wife of the bank manager. Barker's admission there was consequently an unprecedented honor.

He cast his eyes timidly round the room, redolent and suggestive in various charming little ways of the young girl's presence. There was the cottage piano which had been brought up in sections on the backs of mules from the foot of the mountain; there was a crayon head of Minerva done by the fair occupant at the age of twelve; there was a profile of herself done by a traveling artist; there were pretty little china ornaments and many flowers, notably a faded but still scented woodland shrub which Barker had presented to her two weeks ago, and over which Miss Kitty had discreetly thrown her white handkerchief as he entered. A wave of hope passed over him at the act, but it was quickly spent as Mr. Carter's roughly playful voice introduced him: —

"Ye kin give Mr. Barker a tune or two to pass time afore lunch, Kitty. You kin let him see what you 're doing in that line. But you 'll have to sit up now, for this young man 's come inter some property, and will be sasheying round in 'Frisco afore long with a biled shirt and a stovepipe, and be givin' the go-by to Boomville. Well! you young folks will excuse me for a while, as I reckon I 'll just toddle over and get the recorder to put that bill o' sale on record. Nothin' like squaring things to onct, Mr. Barker."

As he slipped away, Barker felt his heart sink. Carter had not only bluntly forestalled him with the news, and taken away his excuse for a confidential interview, but had put an ostentatious construction on his visit. What could she think of him now? He stood ashamed and embarrassed before her.

But Miss Kitty, far from noticing his embarrassment in a sudden concern regarding the "horrid" untidiness of the room, which made her cheeks quite pink in one spot, and obliged her to take up and set down in exactly the same place several articles, was exceedingly delighted. In fact, she did not remember ever having been so pleased before in her life! These things were always so unexpected! Just like the weather, for instance. It was quite cool last night — and now it was just stifling. And so dusty! Had Mr. Barker noticed the heat coming from the Gulch? Or perhaps, being a rich man, he — with a dazzling smile — was above walking now. It was so kind of him to come here first and tell her father.

"I really wanted to tell only — *you*, Miss Carter," stammered Barker. "You see" — He hesitated. But Miss Kitty saw perfectly. He wanted to tell *her*, and, seeing her, he asked for *her father!* Not that it made the slightest difference to her, for her father would have been sure to have told her. It was also kind of her father to invite him to luncheon. Otherwise she might not have seen him before he left Boomville.

But this was more than Barker could stand. With the same desperate directness and simplicity with which he had approached her father, he now blurted out his whole heart to her. He told her how he had loved her hopelessly from the first time that they had spoken together at the church picnic. Did she remember it? How he had sat and worshiped her, and nothing else, at church! How her voice in the church choir had sounded like an angel's; how his poverty and his uncertain future had kept him from seeing her often, lest he should be tempted to betray his hopeless passion. How as soon as he realized that he had a position, that his love for her need not make her ridiculous to the world's eyes, he came to tell her *all*. He did not even dare to hope! But she would *hear* him at least, would she not?

Indeed, there was no getting away from his boyish, simple, outspoken declaration. In vain Kitty smiled, frowned, glanced at her pink cheeks in the glass, and stopped to look out of the window. The room was filled with his love — it was encompassing her — and, despite his shy attitude, seemed to be almost embracing her. But she managed at last to turn upon him a face that was now as white and grave as his own was eager and glowing.

"Sit down," she said gently.

He did so obediently, but wonderingly. She then opened the piano and took a seat upon the music stool before it, placed some loose sheets of music in the rack, and ran her fingers lightly over the keys. Thus intrenched, she let her hands fall idly in her lap, and for the first time raised her eyes to his.

"Now listen to me — be good and don't interrupt! There! — not so near; you can hear what I have to say well enough where you are. That will do."

Barker had halted with the chair he was dragging towards her and sat down.

"Now," said Miss Kitty, withdrawing her eyes and looking straight before her, "I believe everything you say; perhaps I ought n't to — or at least *say* it — but I do. There! But because I do believe you — it seems to me all wrong! For the very reasons that you give for not having spoken to me *before*, if you really felt as you say you did, are the same reasons why you should not speak to me now. You see, all this time you have let nobody but yourself know how you felt toward me. In everybody's eyes *you* and your partners have been only the three stuck-up, exclusive, college-bred men who mined a poor claim in the Gulch, and occasionally came here to this hotel as customers. In everybody's eyes *I* have been only the rich hotel-keeper's popular daughter, who sometimes waited upon you — but nothing more. But at least we were then pretty much alike, and one as good as the other. And now, as soon as you have become suddenly rich, and, of course, the *superior*, you rush down here to ask me to acknowledge it by accepting you!"

"You know I never meant that, Miss Kitty," burst out Barker vehemently, but his protest was drowned in a rapid roulade from the young lady's fingers on the keys. He sank back in his chair.

"Of course you never *meant* it," she said with an odd laugh; "but everybody will take it in that way, and you cannot go round to everybody in Boomville and make the pretty declaration you have just made to me. Everybody will say I accepted you for your money; everybody will say it was a put-up job of my father's. Everybody will say that you threw yourself away on me. And I don't know but that they would be right. Sit down, please! or I shall play again.

"You see," she went on, without looking at him; "just now you like to remember that you fell in love with me first as a pretty waiter girl, but if I became your wife it 's

YOU KNOW I NEVER MEANT THAT

just what you would like to *forget*. And *I* should n't, for I should always like to think of the time when you came here, whenever you could afford it, and sometimes when you could n't, just to see me; and how we used to make excuses to speak with each other over the dishes. You don't know what these things mean to a woman who" — She hesitated a moment, and then added abruptly, "But what does that matter? You would not care to be reminded of it. So," she said, rising up with a grave smile and grasping her hands tightly behind her, "it 's a good deal better that you should begin to forget it now. Be a good boy and take my advice. Go to San Francisco. You will meet some girl there in a way you will not afterwards regret. You are young, and your riches, to say nothing," she added in a faltering voice that was somewhat inconsistent with the mischievous smile that played upon her lips, "of your kind and simple heart, will secure that which the world would call unselfish affection from one more equal to you, but would always believe was only *bought* if it came from me."

"I suppose you are right," he said simply.

She glanced quickly at him, and her eyebrows straightened. He had risen, his face white and his gray eyes widely opened.

"I suppose you are right," he went on, "because you are saying to me what my partners said to me this morning, when I offered to share my wealth with them, God knows as honestly as I offered to share my heart with you. I suppose that you are both right; that there must be some curse of pride or selfishness upon the money that I have got; but *I* have not felt it yet, and the fault does not lie with me."

She gave her shoulders a slight shrug, and turned impatiently toward the window. When she turned back again he was gone. The room around her was empty; this room, which a moment before had seemed to be pulsating with his boyish passion, was now empty, and empty of *him*. She bit her lips, rose, and ran eagerly to the window. She saw his straw hat and brown curls as he crossed the road. She drew her handkerchief sharply away from the withered shrub over which she had thrown it, and cast the once treasured remains in the hearth. Then, possibly because she had it ready in her hand, she clapped the handkerchief to her eyes, and, sinking sideways upon the chair he had risen from, put her elbows on its back, and buried her face in her hands.

It is the characteristic and perhaps cruelty of a simple nature to make no allowance for complex motives, or to even understand them! So it seemed to Barker that his simplicity had been met with equal directness. It was the possession of this wealth that had in some way hopelessly changed his relations with the world. He did not love Kitty any the less; he did not even think she had wronged him; they, his partners and his sweetheart, were cleverer than he; there must be some occult quality in this wealth that he would understand when he possessed it, and perhaps it might even make him ashamed of his generosity; not in the way they had said, but in his tempting them so audaciously to assume a wrong position. It behoved him to take possession of it at once, and to take also upon himself alone the knowledge, the trials, and responsibilities it would incur. His cheeks flushed again as he thought he had tried to tempt an innocent girl with it, and he was keenly hurt that he had not seen in Kitty's eyes the tenderness that had softened his partners' refusal. He resolved to wait no longer, but sell his dreadful stock at once. He walked directly to the bank.

The manager, a shrewd but kindly man, to whom Barker was known already, received him graciously in recognition of his well-known simple honesty, and respectfully as a representative of the equally well-known poor but "superior" partnership of the Gulch. He listened with marked attention to Barker's hesitating but brief story, only remarking at its close: —

"You mean, of course, the '*Second* Extension' when you say 'First'?"

"No," said Barker; "I mean the 'First' — and it said First in the Boomville paper."

"Yes, yes! — I saw it — it was a printer's error. The stock of the 'First' was called in two years ago. No! You mean the 'Second,' for, of course, you 've followed the quotations, and are likely to know what stock you 're holding shares of. When you go back, take a look at them, and you 'll see I am right."

"But I brought them with me," said Barker, with a slight flushing as he felt in his pocket, "and I am quite sure they are the 'First.'" He brought them out and laid them on the desk before the manager.

The words "First Extension" were plainly visible. The manager glanced curiously at Barker, and his brow darkened.

"Did anybody put this up on you?" he said sternly. "Did your partners send you here with this stuff?"

"No! no!" said Barker eagerly. "No one! It 's all *my* mistake. I see it now. I trusted to the newspaper."

"And you mean to say you never examined the stock or the quotations, nor followed it in any way, since you had it?"

"Never!" said Barker. "Never thought about *it at all* till I saw the newspaper. So it 's not worth anything?"

And, to the infinite surprise of the manager, there was a slight smile on his boyish face.

"I am afraid it is not worth the paper it 's written on," said the manager gently.

The smile on Barker's face increased to a little laugh, in which his wondering companion could not help joining.

"Thank you," said Barker suddenly, and rushed away.

"He beats everything!" said the manager, gazing after him. "D—d if he did n't seem even *pleased.*"

He *was* pleased. The burden of wealth had fallen from his shoulders; the dreadful incubus that had weighed him down and parted his friends from him was gone! And he had not got rid of it by spending it foolishly. It had not ruined anybody yet; it had not altered anybody in *his* eyes. It was gone: and he was a free and happy man once more. He would go directly back to his partners; they would laugh at him, of course, but they could not look at him now with the same sad, commiserating eyes. Perhaps even Kitty — But here a sudden chill struck him. He had forgotten the bill of sale! He had forgotten the dreadful promissory note given to her father in the rash presumption of his wealth! How could it ever be paid? And more than that, it had been given in a fraud. He had no money when he gave it, and no prospect of any but what he was to get from those worthless shares. Would anybody believe him that it was only a stupid blunder of his own? Yes, his partners might believe him; but, horrible thought, he had already implicated *them* in his fraud! Even now, while he was standing there hesitatingly in the road, they were entering upon the new claim he had *not paid for — could not pay for* — and in the guise of a benefactor he was dishonoring them. Yet it was Carter he must meet first; he must confess all to him. He must go back to the hotel — that hotel where he had indignantly left her, and tell the father he was a fraud. It was terrible to think of; perhaps it was part of that money curse that he could not get rid of, and was now realizing; but it *must* be done. He was simple, but his very simplicity had that unhesitating directness of conclusion which is the main factor of what men call "pluck."

He turned back to the hotel and entered the office. But Mr. Carter had not yet returned. What was to be done? He could not wait there; there was no time to be lost; there was only one other person who knew his expectations, and to whom he could confide his failure — it was Kitty. It was to taste the dregs of his humiliation, but it must be done. He ran up the staircase and knocked timidly at the sitting-room door. There was a momentary pause, and a weak voice said, "Come in." Barker opened the door; saw the vision of a handkerchief thrown away, of a pair of tearful eyes that suddenly changed to stony indifference, and a graceful but stiffening figure. But he was past all insult now.

"I would not intrude," he said simply, "but I came only to see your father. I have made an awful blunder — more than a blunder, I think — a *fraud*. Believing that I was rich, I purchased your father's claim for my partners, and gave him my promissory note. I came here to give him back his claim — for that note can *never* be paid! I have just been to the bank; I find I have made a stupid mistake in the name of the shares upon which I based my belief in my wealth. The ones I own are worthless — I am as poor as ever — I am even poorer, for I owe your father money I can never pay!"

To his amazement he saw a look of pain and scorn come into her troubled eyes which he had never seen before.

"This is a feeble trick," she said bitterly; "it is unlike you — it is unworthy of you!"

"Good God! You must believe me. Listen! It was all a mistake — a printer's error. I read in the paper that the stock for the First Extension mine had gone up, when it should have been the Second. I had some old stock of the First, which I had kept for years, and only thought of when I read the announcement in the paper this morning. I swear to you" —

But it was unnecessary. There was no doubting the truth of that voice — that manner. The scorn fled from Miss Kitty's eyes to give place to a stare, and then suddenly changed to two bubbling blue wells of laughter. She went to the window and laughed. She sat down to the piano and laughed. She caught up the handkerchief, and hiding half her rosy face in it, laughed. She finally collapsed into an easy-chair, and, burying her brown head in its cushions, laughed long and confidentially until she brought up suddenly against a sob. And then was still.

Barker was dreadfully alarmed. He had heard of hysterics before. He felt he ought to do something. He moved towards her timidly, and gently drew away her handkerchief. Alas! the blue wells were running over now. He took her cold hands in his; he knelt beside her and passed his arm around her waist. He drew her head upon his shoulder. He was not sure that any of these things were effective until she suddenly lifted her eyes to his with the last ray of mirth in them vanishing in a big teardrop, put her arms round his neck, and sobbed:—

"Oh, George! You blessed innocent!"

An eloquent silence was broken by a remorseful start from Barker.

"But I must go and warn my poor partners, dearest; there yet may be time; perhaps they have not yet taken possession of your father's claim."

"Yes, George dear," said the young girl, with sparkling eyes; "and tell them to do so *at once!*"

"What?" gasped Barker.

"At once — do you hear? — or it may be too late! Go quick."

"But your father — Oh, I see, dearest, you will tell him all yourself, and spare me."

"I shall do nothing so foolish, Georgey. Nor shall you! Don't you see the note is n't due for a month. Stop! Have you told anybody but paw and me?"

"Only the bank manager."

She ran out of the room and returned in a minute tying he most enchanting of hats by a ribbon under her oval chin.

"I'll run over and fix him," she said.

"Fix him?" returned Barker, aghast.

"Yes, I'll say your wicked partners have been playing a practical joke on you, and he must n't give you away. He'll do anything for me."

"But my partners did n't! On the contrary" —

"Don't tell me, George," said Miss Kitty severely. "*They* ought never to have let you come here with that stuff. But come! You must go at once. You must not meet paw; you'll blurt out everything to him; I know you! I'll tell him you could not stay to luncheon. Quick, now; go. What? Well — there!"

Whatever it represented, the exclamation was apparently so protracted that Miss Kitty was obliged to push her lover to the front landing before she could disappear by the back stairs. But, once in the street, Barker no longer lingered. It was a good three miles back to the Gulch; he might still reach it by the time his partners were taking their noonday rest, and he resolved that, although the messenger had preceded him, they would not enter upon the new claim until the afternoon. For Barker, in spite of his mistress's injunction, had no idea of taking what he could n't pay for; he would keep the claim intact until something could be settled. For the rest, he walked on air! Kitty loved him! The accursed wealth no longer stood between them. They were both poor now — everything was possible.

The sun was beginning to send dwarf shadows towards the east when he reached the Gulch. Here a new trepidation seized him. How would his partners receive the news of his utter failure? *He* was happy, for he had gained

Kitty through it. But they? For a moment it seemed to him that he had purchased his happiness through their loss. He stopped, took off his hat, and ran his fingers remorsefully through his damp curls.

Another thing troubled him. He had reached the crest of the Gulch, where their old working ground was spread before him like a map. They were not there; neither were they lying under the four pines on the ridge where they were wont to rest at midday. He turned with some alarm to the new claim adjoining theirs, but there was no sign of them there either. A sudden fear that they had, after parting from him, given up the claim in a fit of disgust and depression, and departed, now overcame him. He clapped his hat on his head and ran in the direction of the cabin.

He had nearly reached it when the rough challenge of "Who 's there?" from the bushes halted him, and Demorest suddenly swung into the trail. But the singular look of sternness and impatience which he was wearing vanished as he saw Barker, and with a loud shout of "All right, it 's only Barker! Hooray!" he ran toward him. In an instant he was joined by Stacy from the cabin, and the two men, catching hold of their returning partner, waltzed him joyfully and breathlessly into the cabin. But the quick-eyed Demorest suddenly let go his hold and stared at Barker's face.

"Why, Barker, old boy, what 's up?"

"Everything 's up," gasped the breathless Barker. "It 's all up about these stocks. It 's all a mistake; all an infernal lie of that newspaper. I never had the right kind of shares. The ones I have are worthless rags;" and the next instant he had blurted out his whole interview with the bank manager.

The two partners looked at each other, and then, to Barker's infinite perplexity, the same extraordinary convulsion that had seized Miss Kitty fell upon them. They laughed, holding on each other's shoulders; they laughed, clinging to Barker's struggling figure; they went out and laughed with their backs against a tree. They laughed separately and in different corners. And then they came up to Barker with tears in their eyes, dropped their heads on his shoulder, and murmured exhaustedly: —

"You blessed ass!"

"But," said Stacy suddenly, "how did you manage to buy the claim?"

"Ah! that 's the most awful thing, boys. I 've *never paid for it*," groaned Barker.

"But Carter sent us the bill of sale," persisted Demorest, "or we should n't have taken it."

"I gave my promissory note at thirty days," said Barker desperately, "and where 's the money to come from now? But," he added wildly, as the men glanced at each other — "you said 'taken it.' Good heavens! you don't mean to say that I 'm *too late* — that you 've — you 've touched it?"

"I reckon that 's pretty much what we *have* been doing," drawled Demorest.

"It looks uncommonly like it," drawled Stacy.

Barker glanced blankly from the one to the other.

"Shall we pass our young friend in to see the show?" said Demorest to Stacy.

"Yes, if he 'll be perfectly quiet and not breathe on the glasses," returned Stacy.

They each gravely took one of Barker's hands and led him to the corner of the cabin. There, on an old flour barrel, stood a large tin prospecting pan, in which the partners also occasionally used to knead their bread. A dirty towel covered it. Demorest whisked it dexterously aside, and disclosed three large fragments of decomposed gold and quartz. Barker started back.

"Heft it!" said Demorest grimly.

Barker could scarcely lift the pan!

"Four thousand dollars' weight if a penny!" said Stacy, in short staccato sentences. "In a pocket! Brought it out the second stroke of the pick! We'd been awfully blue after you left. Awfully blue, too, when that bill of sale came, for we thought you'd been wasting your money on *us.* Reckoned we ought n't to take it, but send it straight back to you. Messenger gone! Then Demorest reckoned as it was done it could n't be undone, and we ought to make just one 'prospect' on the claim, and strike a single stroke for you. And there it is. And there's more on the hillside."

"But it is n't *mine!* It is n't *yours!* It's Carter's. I never had the money to pay for it — and I have n't got it now."

"But you gave the note — and it is not due for thirty days."

A recollection flashed upon Barker.

"Yes," he said with thoughtful simplicity, "that's what Kitty said."

"Oh, Kitty said so," said both partners gravely.

"Yes," stammered Barker, turning away with a heightened color, "and, as I did n't stay there to luncheon, I think I'd better be getting it ready."

He picked up the coffee-pot and turned to the hearth as his two partners stepped beyond the door.

"Was n't it exactly like him?" said Demorest.

"Him all over," said Stacy.

"And his worry over that note?" said Demorest.

"And 'what Kitty said'?" said Stacy.

"Look here! I reckon that was n't *all* that Kitty said."

"Of course not."

"What luck!"

MY FIRST BOOK

When I say that my "First Book" was *not* my own, and contained beyond the title-page not one word of my own composition, I trust that I will not be accused of trifling with paradox, or tardily unbosoming myself of youthful plagiary. But the fact remains that in priority of publication the first book for which I became responsible, and which probably provoked more criticism than anything I have written since, was a small compilation of Californian poems indited by other hands.

A well-known bookseller of San Francisco one day handed me a collection of certain poems which had already appeared in Pacific Coast magazines and newspapers, with the request that I should, if possible, secure further additions to them, and then make a selection of those which I considered the most notable and characteristic, for a single volume to be issued by him. I have reason to believe that this unfortunate man was actuated by a laudable desire to publish a pretty Californian book — *his* first essay in publication — and at the same time to foster Eastern immigration by an exhibit of the Californian literary product; but, looking back upon his venture, I am inclined to think that the little volume never contained anything more poetical, pathetic, or touchingly imaginative than that gentle conception. Equally simple and trustful was his selection of myself as compiler. It was based somewhat, I think, upon the fact that "the artless Helicon" I boasted "was Youth," but I imagine it was chiefly owing to the circumstance that I had from the outset, with precocious fore-sight, confided to him my intention of not putting any of my own verses in the volume. Publishers are appreciative; and a self-abnegation so sublime, to say nothing of its security, was not without its effect.

We settled to our work with fatuous self-complacency, and no suspicion of the trouble in store for us, or the storm that was to presently hurtle around our devoted heads. I winnowed the poems, and he exploited a preliminary announcement to an eager and waiting press, and we moved together unwittingly to our doom. I remember to have been early struck with the quantity of material coming in — evidently the result of some popular misunderstanding of the announcement. I found myself in daily and hourly receipt of sere and yellow fragments, originally torn from some dead and gone newspaper, creased and seamed from long folding in wallet or pocketbook. Need I say that most of them were of an emotional or didactic nature; need I add any criticism of these homely souvenirs, often discolored by the morning coffee, the evening tobacco, or, Heaven knows! perhaps blotted by too easy tears! Enough that I knew now what had become of those original but never recopied verses which filled the "Poet's Corner" of every country newspaper on the coast. I knew now the genesis of every didactic verse that "coldly furnished forth the marriage table" in the announcement of weddings in the rural press. I knew now who had read — and possibly indited — the dreary hic jacets of the dead in their mourning columns. I knew now why certain letters of the alphabet had been more tenderly considered than others, and affectionately addressed. I knew the meaning of the "Lines to Her who can best understand them," and I knew that they *had* been understood. The morning's post buried my table beneath these withered leaves of posthumous passion. They lay there like the pathetic nosegays of quickly fading wild flowers, gathered by school-children, inconsistently abandoned upon roadsides, or as inconsistently treasured as limp and flabby superstitions in their desks. The chill wind from the Bay blowing in at the window seemed to rustle them into sad articulate appeal. I remember that when one of them was whisked from the window by a stronger gust than usual, and was attaining a circulation it had never known before, I ran a block or two to recover it. I was young then, and in an exalted sense of editorial responsibility, which I have since survived, I think I turned pale at the thought that the reputation of some unknown genius might have thus been swept out and swallowed by the all-absorbing sea.

There were other difficulties arising from this unexpected wealth of material. There were dozens of poems on the same subject. "The Golden Gate," "Mount Shasta," "The Yosemite," were especially provocative. A beautiful bird known as the "Californian Canary" appeared to have been shot at and winged by every poet from Portland to San Diego. Lines to the Mariposa flower were as thick as the lovely blossoms themselves in the Merced valley, and the Madroño tree was as "berhymed" as Rosalind. Again, by a liberal construction of the publisher's announcement, *manuscript* poems, which had never known print, began to coyly unfold their virgin blossoms in the morning's mail. They were accompanied by a few lines stating, casually, that their sender had found them lying forgotten in his desk, or, mendaciously, that they were "thrown off" on the spur of the moment a few hours before. Some of the names appended to them astonished me. Grave, practical business men, sage financiers, fierce speculators, and plodding traders, never before suspected of poetry, or even correct prose, were among the contributors. It seemed as if most of the able-bodied inhabitants of the Pacific Coast had been in the habit at some time of expressing themselves in verse. Some sought confidential interviews with the editor. The climax was reached when, in Montgomery Street, one day, I was approached by a well-known and venerable judicial magnate. After some serious preliminary conversation, the old gentleman finally alluded to what he was pleased to call a task of "great delicacy and responsibility" laid upon my "young shoulders."

"In fact," he went on paternally, adding the weight of his judicial hand to that burden, "I have thought of speaking to you about it. In my leisure moments on the Bench I have, from time to time, polished and perfected a certain college poem begun years ago, but which may now be said to have been finished in California, and thus embraced in the scope of your proposed selection. If a few extracts, selected by myself, to save you all trouble and responsibility, be of any benefit to you, my dear young friend, consider them at your service."

In this fashion the contributions had increased to three times the bulk of the original collection, and the difficulties of selection were augmented in proportion. The editor and publisher eyed each other aghast.

"Never thought there were so many of the blamed things alive," said the latter with great simplicity, "had you?" The editor had not. "Could n't you sorter shake 'em up and condense 'em, you know? keep their ideas — and their names — separate, so that they 'd have proper credit. See?"

The editor pointed out that this would infringe the rule he had laid down.

"I see," said the publisher thoughtfully; "well, could n't you pare 'em down; give the first verse entire, and sorter sample the others?"

The editor thought not.

There was clearly nothing to do but to make a more rigid selection — a difficult performance when the material was uniformly on a certain dead-level, which it is not necessary to define here. Among the rejections were, of course, the usual plagiarisms from well-known authors imposed upon an inexperienced country press; several admirable pieces detected as acrostics of patent medicines, and certain veiled libels and indecencies such as mark the "first" publications on blank walls and fences of the average youth. Still the bulk remained too large, and the youthful editor set to work reducing it still more with a sympathizing concern which the good-natured, but unliterary, publisher failed to understand, and which, alas! proved to be equally unappreciated by the rejected contributors.

The book appeared — a pretty little volume typographically, and externally a credit to pioneer bookmaking. Copies were liberally supplied to the press, and authors and publishers self-complacently awaited the result. To the latter this should have been satisfactory; the book sold readily from his well-known counters to purchasers who seemed to be drawn by a singular curiosity, unaccompanied, however, by any critical comment. People would lounge in to the shop, turn over the leaves of other volumes, say carelessly, "Got a new book of California poetry out, have n't you?" purchase it, and quietly depart. There were as yet no notices from the press; the big dailies were silent; there was something ominous in this calm.

Out of it the bolt fell. A well-known mining weekly, which I here poetically veil under the title of the Red Dog "Jay Hawk," was first to swoop down upon the tuneful and unsuspecting quarry. At this century-end of fastidious and complaisant criticism, it may be interesting to recall the direct style of the Californian "sixties."

"The hogwash and 'purp' stuff ladled out from the slop-bucket of Messrs. —— and Co., of 'Frisco, by some lop-eared Eastern apprentice, and called 'A Compilation of Californian Verse,' might be passed over, so far as criticism goes. A club in the hands of any able-bodied citizen of Red Dog, and a steamboat ticket to the Bay, cheerfully contributed from this office, would be all-sufficient. But when an imported greenhorn dares to call his flapdoodle mixture 'Californian,' it is an insult to the State that has produced the gifted 'Yellow Hammer,' whose lofty flights have from time to time dazzled our readers in the columns of the 'Jay Hawk.' That this complacent editorial jackass, browsing among the dock and thistles which he has served up in this volume, should make no allusion to California's greatest bard is rather a confession of his idiocy than a slur upon the genius of our esteemed contributor."

I turned hurriedly to my pile of rejected contributions —the nom de plume of "Yellow Hammer" did *not* appear among them; certainly I had never heard of its existence. Later, when a friend showed me one of that gifted bard's pieces, I was inwardly relieved. It was so like the majority of the other verses, in and out of the volume, that the mysterious poet might have written under a hundred aliases.

But the Dutch Flat "Clarion," following with no uncertain sound, left me small time for consideration.

"We doubt," said that journal, "if a more feeble collection of drivel could have been made, even if taken exclusively from the editor's own verses, which we note he has, by an equal editorial incompetency, left out of the volume. When we add that, by a felicity of idiotic selection, this person has chosen only one, and the least characteristic, of the really clever poems of Adoniram Skaggs, which have so often graced these columns, we have said enough to satisfy our readers."

The Mormon Hill "Quartz Crusher" relieved this simple directness with more fancy:—

"We don't know why Messrs. —— and Co. send us, under the title of 'Selections of Californian Poetry,' a quantity of slumgullion which really belongs to the sluices of a placer mining camp, or the ditches of the rural districts. We have sometimes been compelled to run a lot of tailings through our stamps, but never of the grade of the samples offered, which, we should say, would average about 33⅓ cents per ton. We have, however, come across a single specimen of pure gold evidently overlooked by the serene ass who has compiled this volume. We copy it with pleasure, as it has already shone in the 'Poet's Corner' of the 'Crusher' as the gifted effusion of the talented Manager of the Excelsior Mill, otherwise known to our delighted readers as 'Outcrop.'"

The Green Springs "Arcadian" was no less fanciful in imagery: —

"Messrs. —— and Co. send us a gaudy green-and-yellow, parrot-colored volume, which is supposed to contain the first callow 'cheepings' and 'peepings' of Californian songsters. From the flavor of the specimens before us we should say that the nest had been disturbed prematurely. There seems to be a good deal of the parrot inside as well as outside the covers, and we congratulate our own sweet singer 'Blue Bird,' who has so often made these columns melodious, that she has escaped the ignominy of being exhibited in Messrs. —— and Co.'s aviary."

I should add that this simile of the aviary and its occupants was ominous, for my tuneful choir was relentlessly slaughtered; the bottom of the cage was strewn with feathers! The big dailies collected the criticisms and published them in their own columns with the grim irony of exaggerated head-lines. The book sold tremendously on account of this abuse, but I am afraid that the public was disappointed. The fun and interest lay in the criticisms, and not in any pointedly ludicrous quality in the rather commonplace collection, and I fear I cannot claim for it even that merit. And it will be observed that the animus of the criticism appeared to be the omission rather than the retention of certain writers.

But this brings me to the most extraordinary feature of this singular demonstration. I do not think that the publishers were at all troubled by it; I cannot conscientiously say that *I* was; I have every reason to believe that the poets themselves, in and out of the volume, were not displeased at the notoriety they had not expected, and I have long since been convinced that my most remorseless critics were not in earnest, but were obeying some sudden impulse started by the first attacking journal. The extravagance of the Red Dog "Jay Hawk" was emulated by others: it was a large, contagious joke, passed from journal to journal in a peculiar cyclonic Western fashion.

And there still lingers, not unpleasantly, in my memory the conclusion of a cheerfully scathing review of the book which may make my meaning clearer: —

"If we have said anything in this article which might cause a single pang to the poetically sensitive nature of the youthful individual calling himself Mr. Francis Bret Harte, — but who, we believe, occasionally parts his name and his hair in the middle, — we will feel that we have not labored in vain, and are ready to sing *Nunc Dimittis*, and hand in our checks. We have no doubt of the absolutely pellucid and lacteal purity of Franky's intentions. He means well to the Pacific Coast, and we return the compliment. But he has strayed away from his parents and guardians while he was too fresh. He will not keep without a little salt."

It was thirty years ago. The book and its Rabelaisian criticisms have been long since forgotten. Alas! I fear that even the capacity for that Gargantuan laughter which met them in those days exists no longer. The names I have used are necessarily fictitious, but where I have been obliged to quote the criticisms from memory I have, I believe, only softened their asperity. I do not know that this story has any moral. The criticisms here recorded never hurt a reputation nor repressed a single honest aspiration. A few contributors to the volume, who were of original merit, have made their mark, independently of it or its critics. The editor, who was for two months the most abused man on the Pacific slope, within the year became the editor of its first successful magazine. Even the publisher prospered, and died respected!

A YELLOW DOG

I NEVER knew why in the Western States of America a yellow dog should be proverbially considered the acme of canine degradation and incompetency, nor why the possession of one should seriously affect the social standing of its possessor. But the fact being established, I think we accepted it at Rattlers Ridge without question. The matter of ownership was more difficult to settle; and although the dog I have in my mind at the present writing attached himself impartially and equally to every one in camp, no one ventured to exclusively claim him; while, after the perpetration of any canine atrocity, everybody repudiated him with indecent haste.

"Well, I can swear he has n't been near our shanty for weeks," or the retort, "He was last seen comin' out of *your* cabin," expressed the eagerness with which Rattlers Ridge washed its hands of any responsibility. Yet he was by no means a common dog, nor even an unhandsome dog; and it was a singular fact that his severest critics vied with each other in narrating instances of his sagacity, insight, and agility which they themselves had witnessed.

He had been seen crossing the "flume" that spanned Grizzly Cañon, at a height of nine hundred feet, on a plank six inches wide. He had tumbled down the "shoot" to the South Fork, a thousand feet below, and was found sitting on the river bank "without a scratch, 'cept that he was lazily givin' himself with his off hind paw." He had been forgotten in a snowdrift on a Sierran shelf, and had come home in the early spring with the conceited complaency of an Alpine traveler and a plumpness alleged to have been the result of an exclusive diet of buried mail bags and their contents. He was generally believed to read the advance election posters, and disappear a day or two before the candidates and the brass band — which he hated — came to the Ridge. He was suspected of having overlooked Colonel Johnson's hand at poker, and of having conveyed to the Colonel's adversary, by a succession of barks, the danger of betting against four kings.

While these statements were supplied by wholly unsupported witnesses, it was a very human weakness of Rattlers Ridge that the responsibility of corroboration was passed to *the dog* himself, and *he* was looked upon as a consummate liar.

"Snoopin' round yere, and *callin'* yourself a poker sharp, are ye! Scoot, you yaller pizin!" was a common adjuration whenever the unfortunate animal intruded upon a card party. "Ef thar was a spark, an *atom* of truth in *that dog*, I 'd believe my own eyes that I saw him sittin' up and trying to magnetize a jay bird off a tree. But wot are ye goin' to do with a yaller equivocator like that?"

I have said that he was yellow — or, to use the ordinary expression, "yaller." Indeed, I am inclined to believe that much of the ignominy attached to the epithet lay in this favorite pronunciation. Men who habitually spoke of a "*yellow* bird," a "*yellow* hammer," a "*yellow* leaf," always alluded to him as a "*yaller* dog."

He certainly *was* yellow. After a bath — usually compulsory — he presented a decided gamboge streak down his back, from the top of his forehead to the stump of his tail, fading in his sides and flank to a delicate straw color. His breast, legs, and feet — when not reddened by "slumgullion," in which he was fond of wading — were white. A few attempts at ornamental decoration from the India-ink pot of the storekeeper failed, partly through the yellow dog's excessive agility, which would never give the paint time to dry on him, and partly through his success in transferring his markings to the trousers and blankets of the camp.

The size and shape of his tail — which had been cut off before his introduction to Rattlers Ridge — were favorite sources of speculation to the miners, both as determining his breed and his moral responsibility in coming into camp in that defective condition. There was a general opinion that he could n't have looked worse with a tail, and its removal was therefore a gratuitous effrontery.

His best feature was his eyes, which were a lustrous Vandyke brown, and sparkling with intelligence; but here again he suffered from evolution through environment, and their original trustful openness was marred by the experience of watching for flying stones, sods, and passing kicks from the rear, so that the pupils were continually reverting to the outer angle of the eyelid.

Nevertheless, none of these characteristics decided the vexed question of his *breed*. His speed and scent pointed to a "hound," and it is related that on one occasion he was laid on the trail of a wildcat with such success that he followed it apparently out of the State, returning at the end of two weeks, footsore, but blandly contented.

Attaching himself to a prospecting party, he was sent under the same belief "into the brush" to drive off a bear, who was supposed to be haunting the camp-fire. He returned in a few minutes *with* the bear, *driving it into* the unarmed circle and scattering the whole party. After this the theory of his being a hunting dog was abandoned. Yet it was said — on the usual uncorroborated evidence — that he had "put up" a quail; and his qualities as a retriever were for a long time accepted, until, during a shooting expedition for wild ducks, it was discovered that the one he had brought back had never been *shot*, and the party were obliged to compound damages with an adjacent settler.

His fondness for paddling in the ditches and "slumgullion" at one time suggested a water spaniel. He could swim, and would occasionally bring out of the river sticks and pieces of bark that had been thrown in; but as *he* always had to be thrown in with them, and was a good-sized dog, his aquatic reputation faded also. He remained simply "a yaller dog." What more could be said? His actual name was "Bones" — given to him, no doubt, through the provincial custom of confounding the occupation of the individual with his quality, for which it was pointed out precedent could be found in some old English family names.

But if Bones generally exhibited no preference for any particular individual in camp, he always made an exception in favor of drunkards. Even an ordinary roystering bacchanalian party brought him out from under a tree or a shed in the keenest satisfaction. He would accompany them through the long straggling street of the settlement, barking his delight at every step or mis-step of the revelers, and exhibiting none of that mistrust of eye which marked his attendance upon the sane and the respectable. He accepted even their uncouth play without a snarl or a yelp, hypocritically pretending even to like it; and I conscientiously believe would have allowed a tin can to be attached to his tail if the hand that tied it on were only unsteady, and the voice that bade him "lie still" were husky with liquor. He would "see" the party cheerfully into a saloon, wait outside the door — his tongue fairly lolling from his mouth in enjoyment — until they reappeared, permit them even to tumble over him with pleasure, and then gambol away before them, heedless of awkwardly projected stones and epithets. He would afterwards accompany them separately home, or lie with them at cross roads until they were assisted to their cabins. Then he would trot rakishly to his own haunt by the saloon stove, with the slightly conscious air of having been a bad dog, yet of having had a good time.

We never could satisfy ourselves whether his enjoyment arose from some merely selfish conviction that he was more *secure* with the physically and mentally incompetent, from some active sympathy with active wickedness, or from a grim sense of this own mental superiority at such moments. But the general belief leant towards his kindred sympathy as a "yaller dog" with all that was disreputable. And this was supported by another very singular canine manifestation — the "sincere flattery" of simulation or imitation.

"Uncle Billy" Riley for a short time enjoyed the position of being the camp drunkard, and at once became an object of Bones' greatest solicitude. He not only accompanied him everywhere, curled at his feet or head according to Uncle Billy's attitude at the moment, but, it was noticed, began presently to undergo a singular alteration in his own habits and appearance. From being an active, tireless scout and forager, a bold and unovertakable marauder, he became lazy and apathetic; allowed gophers to burrow under him without endeavoring to undermine the settlement in his frantic endeavors to dig them out, permitted squirrels to flash their tails at him a hundred yards away, forgot his usual *caches*, and left his favorite bones unburied and bleaching in the sun. His eyes grew dull, his coat lustreless, in proportion as his companion became blear-eyed and ragged; in running, his usual arrow-like directness began to deviate, and it was not unusual to meet the pair together, zig-zagging up the hill. Indeed, Uncle Billy's condition could be predetermined by Bones' appearance at times when his temporary master was invisible. "The old man must have an awful jag on to-day," was casually remarked when an extra fluffiness and imbecility was noticeable in the passing Bones. At first it was believed that he drank also, but when careful investigation proved this hypothesis untenable, he was freely called a "derned time-servin', yaller hypocrite." Not a few advanced the opinion that if Bones did not actually lead Uncle Billy astray, he at least "slavered him over and coddled him until the old man got conceited in his wickedness." This undoubtedly led to a compulsory divorce between them, and Uncle Billy was happily despatched to a neighboring town and a doctor.

Bones seemed to miss him greatly, ran away for two days, and was supposed to have visited him, to have been shocked at his convalescence, and to have been "cut" by Uncle Billy in his reformed character; and he returned to his old active life again, and buried his past with his forgotten bones. It was said that he was afterwards detected in trying to lead an intoxicated tramp into camp after the methods employed by a blind man's dog, but was discovered in time by the — of course — uncorroborated narrator.

I should be tempted to leave him thus in his original and picturesque sin, but the same veracity which compelled me to transcribe his faults and iniquities obliges me to describe his ultimate and somewhat monotonous reformation, which came from no fault of his own.

It was a joyous day at Rattlers Ridge that was equally the advent of his change of heart and the first stagecoach that had been induced to diverge from the highroad and stop regularly at our settlement. Flags were flying from the post office and Polka saloon — and Bones was flying before the brass band that he detested, when the sweetest girl in the county — Pinkey Preston — daughter of the county judge and hopelessly beloved by all Rattlers Ridge, stepped from the coach which she had glorified by occupying as an invited guest.

"What makes him run away?" she asked quickly, opening her lovely eyes in a possible innocent wonder that anything could be found to run away from her.

"He don't like the brass band," we explained eagerly.

"How funny," murmured the girl; "is it as out of tune as all that?"

This irresistible witticism alone would have been enough to satisfy us — we did nothing but repeat it to each other all the next day — but we were positively transported when we saw her suddenly gather her dainty skirts in one hand and trip off through the red dust towards Bones, who, with his eyes over his yellow shoulder, had halted in the road, and half turned in mingled disgust and rage at the spectacle of the descending trombone. We held our breath as she approached him. Would Bones evade her as he did us at such moments, or would he save our reputation, and consent, for the moment, to accept her as a new kind of inebriate? She came nearer; he saw her; he began to slowly quiver with excitement — his stump of a tail vibrating with such rapidity that the loss of the missing portion was scarcely noticeable. Suddenly she stopped before him, took his yellow head between her little hands, lifted it, and looked down in his handsome brown eyes with her two lovely blue ones. What passed between them in that magnetic glance no one ever knew. She returned with him; said to him casually: "We 're not afraid of brass bands, are we?" to which he apparently acquiesced, at least stifling his disgust of them, while he was near her — which was nearly all the time.

During the speech-making her gloved hand and his yellow head were always near together, and at the crowning ceremony — her public checking of Yuba Bill's "waybill," on behalf of the township, with a gold pencil, presented to her by the Stage Company — Bones' joy, far from knowing no bounds, seemed to know nothing but them, and he witnessed it apparently in the air. No one dared to interfere. For the first time a local pride in Bones sprang up in our hearts — and we lied to each other in his praises openly and shamelessly.

Then the time came for parting. We were standing by the door of the coach, hats in hand, as Miss Pinkey was about to step into it; Bones was waiting by her side, confidently looking into the interior, and apparently selecting his own seat on the lap of Judge Preston in the corner, when Miss Pinkey held up the sweetest of admonitory fingers. Then, taking his head between her two hands, she again looked into his brimming eyes, and said, simply, "*Good* dog," with the gentlest of emphasis on the adjective, and popped into the coach.

The six bay horses started as one, the gorgeous green and gold vehicle bounded forward, the red dust rose behind, and the yellow dog danced in and out of it to the very outskirts of the settlement. And then he soberly returned.

A day or two later he was missed — but the fact was afterwards known that he was at Spring Valley, the county town where Miss Preston lived — and he was forgiven. A week afterwards he was missed again, but this time for a longer period, and then a pathetic letter arrived from Sacramento for the storekeeper's wife.

"Would you mind," wrote Miss Pinkey Preston, "asking some of your boys to come over here to Sacramento and bring back Bones? I don't mind having the dear dog walk out with me at Spring Valley, where every one knows me; but here he *does* make one so noticeable, on account of *his color*. I've got scarcely a frock that he agrees with. He don't go with my pink muslin, and that lovely buff tint he makes three shades lighter. You know yellow is *so* trying."

A consultation was quickly held by the whole settle ment, and a deputation sent to Sacramento to relieve the unfortunate girl. We were all quite indignant with Bones — but, oddly enough, I think it was greatly tempered with our new pride in him. While he was with us alone, his peculiarities had been scarcely appreciated, but the recurrent phrase, "that yellow dog that they keep at the Rattlers," gave us a mysterious importance along the country side, as if we had secured a "mascot" in some zoölogical curiosity.

This was further indicated by a singular occurrence. A new church had been built at the cross roads, and an eminent divine had come from San Francisco to preach the opening sermon. After a careful examination of the camp's wardrobe, and some felicitous exchange of apparel, a few of us were deputed to represent "Rattlers" at the Sunday service. In our white ducks, straw hats, and flannel blouses, we were sufficiently picturesque and distinctive as "honest miners" to be shown off in one of the front pews.

Seated near the prettiest girls, who offered us their hymn-books — in the cleanly odor of fresh pine shavings, and ironed muslin, and blown over by the spices of our own woods through the open windows, a deep sense of the abiding peace of Christian communion settled upon us. At this supreme moment some one murmured in an awe-stricken whisper: —

"*Will* you look at Bones?"

We looked. Bones had entered the church and gone up in the gallery through a pardonable ignorance and modesty; but, perceiving his mistake, was now calmly walking along the gallery rail before the astounded worshipers. Reaching the end, he paused for a moment, and carelessly looked down. It was about fifteen feet to the floor below — the simplest jump in the world for the mountain-bred Bones. Daintily, gingerly, lazily, and yet with a conceited airiness of manner, as if, humanly speaking, he had one leg in his pocket and were doing it on three, he cleared the distance, dropping just in front of the chancel, without a sound, turned himself around three times, and then lay comfortably down.

Three deacons were instantly in the aisle coming up before the eminent divine, who, we fancied, wore a restrained smile. We heard the hurried whispers: "Belongs to them." "Quite a local institution here, you know." "Don't like to offend sensibilities;" and the minister's prompt "By no means," as he went on with his service.

A short month ago we would have repudiated Bones; to-day we sat there in slightly supercilious attitudes, as if to indicate that any affront offered to Bones would be an insult to ourselves, and followed by our instantaneous withdrawal in a body.

All went well, however, until the minister, lifting the large Bible from the communion table and holding it in both hands before him, walked towards a reading-stand by the altar rails. Bones uttered a distinct growl. The minister stopped.

We, and we alone, comprehended in a flash the whole situation. The Bible was nearly the size and shape of one of those soft clods of sod which we were in the playful habit of launching at Bones when he lay half asleep in the sun, in order to see him cleverly evade it.

We held our breath. What was to be done? But the opportunity belonged to our leader, Jeff Briggs — a confoundedly good-looking fellow, with the golden mustache of a northern viking and the curls of an Apollo. Secure in his beauty and bland in his self-conceit, he rose from the pew, and stepped before the chancel rails.

"I would wait a moment, if I were you, sir," he said, respectfully, "and you will see that he will go out quietly."

"What is wrong?" whispered the minister in some concern.

"He thinks you are going to heave that book at him, sir, without giving him a fair show, as we do."

The minister looked perplexed, but remained motionless, with the book in his hands. Bones arose, walked half way down the aisle, and vanished like a yellow flash!

With this justification of his reputation, Bones disappeared for a week. At the end of that time we received a polite note from Judge Preston, saying that the dog had become quite domiciled in their house, and begged that the camp, without yielding up their valuable *property* in him, would allow him to remain at Spring Valley for an indefinite time; that both the judge and his daughter — with whom Bones was already an old friend — would be glad if the members of the camp would visit their old favorite whenever they desired, to assure themselves that he was well cared for.

I am afraid that the bait thus ingenuously thrown out had a good deal to do with our ultimate yielding. However, the reports of those who visited Bones were wonderful and marvelous. He was residing there in state, lying on rugs in the drawing-room, coiled up under the judicial desk in the judge's study, sleeping regularly on the mat outside Miss Pinkey's bedroom door, or lazily snapping at flies on the judge's lawn.

"He 's as yaller as ever," said one of our informants, "but it don't somehow seem to be the same back that we used to break clods over in the old time, just to see him scoot out of the dust."

And now I must record a fact which I am aware all lovers of dogs will indignantly deny, and which will be furiously bayed at by every faithful hound since the days of Ulysses. Bones not only *forgot*, but absolutely *cut us!* Those who called upon the judge in "store clothes" he would perhaps casually notice, but he would sniff at them as if detecting and resenting them under their superficial exterior. The rest he simply paid no attention to. The more familiar term of "Bonesy" — formerly applied to him, as in our rare moments of endearment — produced no response. This pained, I think, some of the more youthful of us; but, through some strange human weakness, it also increased the camp's respect for him. Nevertheless, we spoke of him familiarly to strangers at the very moment he ignored us. I am afraid that we also took some pains to point out that he was getting fat and unwieldy, and losing his elasticity, implying covertly that his choice was a mistake and his life a failure.

A year after he died, in the odor of sanctity and respectability, being found one morning coiled up and stiff on the mat outside Miss Pinkey's door. When the news was conveyed to us, we asked permission, the camp being in a prosperous condition, to erect a stone over his grave. But when it came to the inscription we could only think of the two words murmured to him by Miss Pinkey, which we always believe effected his conversion: —

"*Good* Dog!"